



Book Review of *Justice That Restores*, Charles W. Colson, Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2001. 172 pages

Charles Colson's book seems so out of place in the Age of Trump. Colson was of course a conservative Evangelical *darling* because he was “saved” post-Watergate and his solution to crime in America became simply personal conversion to Christ – as you will see below.

And his kind of Christianity in turn has made Trump into an Evangelical *darling*. Wherein the connection?: both darlings pander to reductionist simplicities in addressing societal ills. What's wrong with America is solved (Trump) by making it (religious right wing) *white again*; (Colson) by making America *Christian again*¹. If it was however even hinted at that America's first step in embracing Christian conversion is divestment from worldwide hegemony and corporate malfeasance, Colson would have (he died in 2012), and the vast majority of American white Evangelicals today would, rise/risen up in uncomprehending shock and horror... Or they at least would needs slink away sorrowfully like the **Rich Young Ruler**. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's interaction with the story highlighted, we read:

The difference between ourselves and the rich young man is that he was not allowed to solace his regrets by saying: “Never mind what Jesus says, I can still hold on to my riches, but in a spirit of inner detachment. Despite my inadequacy I can take comfort in the thought that God has forgiven me my sins and can have fellowship with Christ in faith.” But no, he went away sorrowful. *Because he would not obey, he could not believe. In this the young man was quite honest. He went away from Jesus and indeed this honesty had more promise than any apparent communion with Jesus based on disobedience* (emphasis added).^[1]

My **website** explores this kind of counter to dominant white Evangelical America sucked in by Trump, so contrary to Colson. It is dedicated to the **Gospel as Counter-Narrative to Empire**.

Sadly, Colson's career as Nixon's “Hatchet Man” was far more successful (until it came crashing to an end!) than his skill as theologian or cultural commentator.

Charles Colson explains that the seeds for this book were sewn while preparing for a series of lectures on criminal justice in England.

I needed to write a book that would help American policy makers and people who work in our country's criminal justice system to think through their positions, policies, and practices (p. x).

Colson states two premises giving rise to this publication. The first is:

¹ One can only say that this, along with American Exceptionalism and many similar, is a perverse American Founding Myth of gargantuan destructive proportions.

The criminal justice system, which is absolutely crucial if government is to carry out its first duty – the preservation of order – urgently needs reform (p. vii).

The second is:

Our ideas and philosophies of criminal justice can no longer be considered in a vacuum (p. viii).

These premises inform the four parts of the book.

Part 1, “The Basis for a Just Society”, presents some sobering statistics about the exponential growth of America’s prison population in recent years. Colson also indicates that “crimes” have changed into ever more vicious, senseless, and perverse acts, often with no motives connecting to the specific victims. He provides a litany of randomly selected illustrative horrors. He proceeds to discuss what is justice, and the importance of natural law, which Colson claims references to biblical revelation. Over against “biblically based” natural law there has been a process of erosion of this as foundation for law in Western history. He concludes Part I with,

If restorative justice is to prevail, the first task ahead of us is to restore the authority of the law itself. Without it, no criminal justice system can be fairly administered. Without it, no society can survive (p. 41).

Part 2 discusses “The Roots of Crime”. Colson argues for the traditional doctrine of original sin as the explanation for crime. In the process, he critiques “utopianism”, whereby people are not held accountable for the choices they have made. The consequences of this bad “anthropology” are a fourfold erosion of personal responsibility, coarsening of crimes, dehumanization of the individual, and compounding of evil. He discusses each of these in some detail. Colson concludes this section with:

Restoration of justice is impossible without restoration of good anthropology... [T]he true cause of crime... is not environment or poverty but wrong moral choices. The truth is, we are not deprived, we are depraved (p. 74).

Part 3, “Redemption” looks at the “Moral Roots of Crime”.

So what is the cause of crime? It turns out the Bible was right all along. *Humans are responsible for sin and evil (p. 79).*

Along the way, he indicates that the lack of large scale religious training in American society, a training of Christian virtues, has significantly created the monstrous problems with crime we face today. He writes,

So this brings us to the crucial question perhaps of this entire book: What can be done to bring about virtue in individuals as they make moral choices (p. 88)?

His answer is personal conversion to Christ. To get to that, he briefly examines other- and non-religious answers. He points both to studies and stories that underscore a christocentric conclusion. In particular, he calls for the moral transformation of the American family as the place to start. He calls also for the creation of “community cohesion” through the mobilization of America’s churches to re-establish virtue in its citizens. He concludes this section with the words,

That reality, the reality of the gospel, is the *only* life-transforming, indeed culture-transforming power. In that is the answer not just to crime but also to life's greatest dilemma (p. 109).

Part 4, "Justice That Restores", finally delivers on the book's title. Colson uses other terms such as "relational" and "transformative" to describe this kind of justice as well. He underscores that "Crime is the Community's Business", and proceeds to describe a range of community options, including prevention programs, "Christian" prisons as operated by Prison Fellowship (the worldwide organization founded by Colson), a variety of reintegration programs, and programs that bring healing to victims. The author concludes with further discussion of what Christian "transformation" means in today's culture. The book's final statement is, ... the time is at hand to turn to what may seem a new and radical model but is actually an old and well-proven one: justice that restores (p. 159).

This book is an avowed attempt to set the issues of crime, punishment, and justice in a comprehensive historical and cultural context. It lacks however the well-researched erudition of his colleagues' *Restoring Justice* (Van Ness and Strong 1997), and the theological acumen of Chris Marshall's *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (2001)².

Colson's book has its good moments, in particular when Colson turns in Part 4 to practical descriptions of Restorative Justice initiatives and many of his points are valid. His numerous stories, from a wealth of personal experience, are inspirational and heart-warming. He also sources some good research material.

The book makes repeated unsubstantiated statements and assumptions however, and serves up many broad generalizations the reader is expected already to know and accept. Colson claims to see the woods by raising at the outset what he terms "Foundational Questions (p. 11)". Regrettably, in this reviewer's opinion, he inadequately looks past the trees. There is "not enough", in the repeated phrase of activist Ruth Morris. I shall mention two significant examples.

First, there is Colson's undefined use of the term "crime" itself, and the basic issue of who commits "crime". What would Colson say of the classic Canadian publication by Thomas Gabor, *'Everybody Does It!': Crime By the Public* (1994), which demonstrates from worldwide studies that Western democracies such as Canada and the United States are largely made up of "opportunistic repeat offenders" - approximately 90% of the population - including law enforcers and elected officialdom? ("There is no one righteous, not even one" could have been the book's subtitle.)

Further, Colson provides for us a litany of horrific crimes to demonstrate how "(street) crime" currently is spinning out of control. He thereby shows a simplistic, individualistic, politically conservative bias that street crime is the only kind legitimately to concern Americans. But evidence is readily accessible for the massive depredations of corporate crime in North America

² Marshall wrote another outstanding book in 2012: *Compassionate Justice: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue with Two Gospel Parables on Law, Crime, and Restorative Justice*.

and worldwide. (I need only mention Enron.) The billions stolen, large numbers of victims annually, and great environmental devastation, make collective street crime in America seem tame by comparison. (See Section III and the various bibliographies of Ruth Morris' *The Case for Penal Abolition* (2000) for example. The literature abounds.) Why does Colson not even allude to this?

Second, Colson makes no connection between crime in America, and the crimes of what American theologian Mark Taylor calls "Lockdown America", an "American Empire" in pursuit of a domestic and worldwide imposed *Pax Americana* as (economically) conquest driven as ancient Rome (2001)³. Taylor, unlike Colson, connects the burgeoning "prison industrial complex" (what Nils Christie called "crime control as industry" in a masterful book by that title (1995)) to the massive "military industrial complex" headed by the Pentagon. Taylor says:

The fusion of our nation's punishment regime at home with a military regime abroad was dramatically signalled in 2001 by the rise of George W. Bush from chief executioner among U.S. governors to chief executive commanding the U.S. military forces that guard transnational business interests (p. xvi).

The vast criminality of both "complexes" is also well documented. (See for example, *A Sin Against the Future: Imprisonment in the World* by Vivien Stern, (1998); and William Blum's *Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower* (2000.) Why has Colson absolutely nothing to say about these kinds of worldwide, organized criminal organizations? Can Colson, former conservative politician, though Christian, possibly be influenced by political bias and not just the Bible in his cultural analysis?

Colson further and rightly specifically alludes to the way in which young people are increasingly desensitized across America through violent video games to commit cold-blooded murder without compunction. He then readily acknowledges that contemporary American military training employs similar methods, but says reassuringly:

The difference, of course, is that soldiers absorb this training in a moral context... (p. 10)

And then he moves on, without apparently batting an eye! (For starters, why did Colson not at least adduce the chilling research conducted and widely disseminated by Lt. Colonel Dave Grossman? See his website: <http://www.killology.com/>, and his book: *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (1995).

Further, is this not the very issue of the New Testament moral witness that is "univocal" against killing (see Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Chapter 14), epitomized in Jesus' clarion command: "Love your enemies."? So when the American military "Timothy McVeighish" killed in excess of 6,000 innocent Afghani civilians in its air war on terrorism, as well as tens of thousands more combatants, and multiplied thousands of civilians and combatants again recently in Iraq; or "nuked" in 1945 120,000 innocent Japanese civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and slaughters millions of innocents worldwide through American interventions since World War II, are these cold-blooded horrors also not moral issues of

³ His book is reviewed in the next chapter.

“crimes against humanity”? (And the most obvious reason that America totally boycotts the recently established International Court).

Are the above not murderous acts of violence that model and elicit imitation by America’s peoples as surely as violent as video games? *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* by American journalist William Blum (1998) is a 457-page litany of such violent crimes by America, which in a more recent book as mentioned is consequently dubbed the ultimate *Rogue State*. Blum writes,

What if all the nice, clean-cut, wholesome American boys who dropped an infinite tonnage of bombs, on a dozen different countries, on people they knew nothing about – characters in a video game – had to come down to earth and look upon and smell the burning flesh (p. 1)?

And this kind of wanton carnage, blessed by Colson (apparently) and certainly by most major Evangelical leaders from Billy Graham on down in the United States, is not crime, is “justified” in fact, because willed by the nation (and hence by God in a perverse reading of Romans 13 worthy of Nazi Germany)? And therefore, by divine alchemy perhaps, worldwide US violence practised daily (if we only care to know⁴) is exempt both from the category of “crime (against humanity)”, and wide imitation by the world public, not least other peoples and nations?

The book has some things to offer. But given its unfortunate American cultural captivity, it is sadly and sorely inadequate to the task, amazingly naïve about the true depth and breadth of violence in today’s world, hence “not enough”, according to its own stated intention, of calling us to a cosmic biblical vision of “justice that restores”. “For God so loved the world!” – one needs to remind Colson and a host of idolatrous American Evangelical leadership.

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⁴ The former apartheid cabinet member Leon Wessels was closer to the mark when he said that they had not wanted to know [about apartheid’s horrors], for there were those who tried to alert them (Archbishop Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, p. 269).

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