

2017

# "Get on the Cart!" Wesleyan Discipleship in an Age of Endemic (Chapter 15 of Thinking Theologically About Mass Incarceration)

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## Recommended Citation

Hartley, Benjamin; Messer, Glen Alton II; and Oh, Kirsten Sonkyo, "'Get on the Cart!' Wesleyan Discipleship in an Age of Endemic (Chapter 15 of Thinking Theologically About Mass Incarceration)" (2017). *Faculty Publications - College of Christian Studies*. 297.  
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## "GET ON THE CART!"

### Wesleyan Discipleship in an Age of Endemic Incarceration

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Fyodor Dostoyevsky once said that the soul of society "can be measured by its prisons."<sup>1</sup> If that is true, then the soul of society in the United States is sick. The statistics on mass incarceration provided elsewhere in this volume illustrate the endemic nature of the problem much like epidemiological data shows the occurrence of a disease, but the stories from prisoners and their families—which the three of us have heard and told—show even more poignantly the depth of the wounds caused by the tragedy of incarceration that defies Christian virtues in this country. We pray this chapter will be one of many applications of healing balm to address this societal disease.

The task of ending our society's addiction to locking people up is too great a task for any one Christian tradition. For a disease as endemic as this one, we need deep resources for theological healing as well as countless deeds of pastoral care and political action to address the problem. Our church families and denominations must work together and learn from one another about how we can continue to "remember those who are in prison" (Heb 13:3) and "proclaim release to the captives" (Luke 4:18) in ways that express the fullness of who we are as Christians united and as members of particular families within the Christian movement.

Our Christian tradition is Wesleyan, our group in that tradition is the United Methodist Church (UMC), and our argument in this paper is just as bold as Dostoyevsky's. We believe that the health

of the whole Christian community is measured by its love of prisoners; loving the prisoner was and is constitutive of Wesleyan discipleship. Visiting prisoners was a key activity very early in the first rise of Methodism in Oxford.<sup>2</sup> It did not stop there as a youthful exercise of discipleship either. In one nine-month stretch, John Wesley preached as many as sixty-seven times in various prisons and jails.<sup>3</sup> His attentiveness to prisoners was less at other times, but Wesley continued to visit prisons on dozens of occasions throughout his life.<sup>4</sup>

Visiting and helping prisoners also became a key marker of discipleship in the *General Rules* early Methodists sought to live by. The second section of the *Rules* stressed discipleship of care "by doing good" to everyone and "by visiting or helping them that are sick or in prison."<sup>5</sup> No dimension of "doing good" in the *General Rules* was more behavior specific than the expectation that a Methodist visits those who are in prison. The sick could be found in many different places, those suffering from lack of clothing could be anywhere, but those who were in prison were found only there. This dimension of the *General Rules* found further institutional expression at the 1788 Methodist Conference in Britain, which called for all preachers to visit those who were in prison.<sup>6</sup>

The Wesley brothers and their friends even accompanied condemned prisoners on the wooden cart as prison officials drove them to the gallows. They hugged them, spoke with them, prayed with them, read Scripture with them, sang with them, and otherwise comforted them—often amid jeers and refuse thrown from the crowds.<sup>7</sup> Early Methodists were bold enough to get on the cart. The way we today choose to address the problem of incarceration will involve a similar boldness, even though our "cart" may take many different forms.

Not everyone will be able to focus as much as the Wesley brothers did on prison ministry, but if one is not seeking out ways to love those who are imprisoned—directly or indirectly even in small ways—or is not active in encouraging those who do so, then we must at least ask if we are taking the demands of Christian discipleship seriously. We readily acknowledge that most of us fall short of the mark; it is easy to point out all the ways we are *not* loving prisoners very well. Our confession of failure is not for self-flagellation but rather to point us toward God's grace in Christ, who was both imprisoned and executed by a powerful Roman empire.



In the church today, many people in the United States and elsewhere continue to minister to prisoners as well as “returned citizens” released from prison. This is encouraging! Our current context in United States society, with its massive prison population, calls for an equally massive ministry to prisoners. As we will discuss below, our own context is not so very different from eighteenth-century Britain regarding our society’s focus on retribution instead of restorative justice.<sup>8</sup> The United Methodist social principle on restorative justice staunchly states the biblical mandate for restorative justice that seeks to heal rather than punish (see Ezek 33:11):

Restorative justice grows out of biblical authority, which emphasizes a right relationship with God, self, and community....

Most criminal justice systems around the world are retributive. These retributive justice systems profess to hold the offender accountable to the state and use punishment as the equalizing tool for accountability. In contrast, restorative justice seeks to hold the offender accountable to the victimized person, and to the disrupted community. Through God’s transforming power, restorative justice seeks to repair the damage, right the wrong, and bring healing to all involved, including the victim, the offender, the families, and the community.<sup>9</sup>

Declarations about restorative justice are critical contributions, but United Methodists around the country also back up these words with Christian discipleship in action. Along with our ecumenical partners, United Methodists today are engaged in practical ministry with incarcerated persons in many ways:

- As of 2007, there were forty-seven United Methodist prison chaplains employed at state and federal prison facilities.
- Together with many other churches and denominations, United Methodists participate in a network of “Healing Communities,” where congregations are

trained and committed to being hospitable places for returned citizens and their families. Over fifty UMC congregations are a part of this expanding ministry.<sup>10</sup>

- At the beginning of 2012, the United Methodist Board of Pensions, the investment arm of the UMC, decided to divest from all companies that profit from the prison systems, such as Corrections Corporation of America, when they realized this misappropriation of investments.
- Prison PATCH (Parents and Their Children) and Prison MATCH (Mothers and Their Children) are ministries in Missouri and North Carolina, respectively, with significant UMC participation to help build closer relationships between incarcerated women and their children.<sup>11</sup>
- For decades, the United Methodist Church’s Social Principles have opposed the death penalty together with the National Council of Churches, and we are beginning to see its demise in a growing number of states in the United States.
- The National Black Methodists for Church Renewal meeting in March 2014 named mass incarceration as one of their main advocacy issues and one that is strongly tied to the wider sin of racism in our nation.<sup>12</sup>

The people who engage in the above activities do so for a variety of reasons. Their work is to be celebrated! We further believe that their ministry can be enhanced and others inspired to follow their example if those others recognize how this work can deepen their relationship with Jesus and the Way he calls us to follow as his disciples.

Our purpose in this chapter, then, is to demonstrate how “getting on the cart” by ministering to and advocating for prisoners, their families, and victims of crime is integral to Christian discipleship. We are going to do that by drawing from the experience of early Methodist work among prisoners as our starting point. Our historical “case studies” are arranged to correspond to what Wesleyans call the “order of salvation” expressed in the prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying nature of God’s grace. We



introduce our historical vignettes by providing the reader with a sense of the context and then offer our theological reflections about the meaning they had for early Methodists and can now have for our own discipleship.

Our reflections will often come in the form of questions rather than prescriptions about how we might want to change. We think the Holy Spirit inspires change. This chapter, then, is an exercise in imaginative reflection on historical events to provide theological insight about how we can grow today as disciples, learning from Jesus and early Methodists "on the cart." We hope Christians from other denominations can be inspired by these stories as well.

Before discussing our historical case studies and how they align with Wesley's order of salvation—God's prevenient, justifying; and sanctifying grace—it is important to first explain in a bit more detail what we mean by these aspects of grace in Wesleyan theology. Wesleyan theology starts with God, who created humankind in God's own image; upon Adam and Eve, God bestowed a caretaking role over all the creatures. The story of Adam and Eve, however, is a story of the corruption of God's good creation and of humanity's continued bent to sinning. The entirety of the Christian life is thus a process of growth and healing by grace. By prevenient grace, we speak of God's grace spread abroad over all of creation and a grace where God initiates and engages the human will to invite a response (see John 6:44; see also Jer 31:3; 1 John 4:10). By justifying grace, we are reconciled to God when a person realizes his/her own sinful state, repents, and accepts by faith the way of Jesus Christ. Through sanctifying grace, God provides both the desire and the power to grow toward holiness or wholeness. We begin, therefore, with prevenient grace and discuss, in turn, justifying grace and sanctifying grace as these aspects of Wesley's theology are seen in the prison ministry of early Methodists.

Some of these historical case studies can be a challenge to our discipleship as we are forced to confront aspects of early Methodist practice with prisoners with which we may disagree or even find offensive. In these cases, we invite the reader to reflect on the reasons why the story may be disturbing. Is it because our understanding of discipleship has become warped by our cultural and historical context? Was there something about the experience of early Methodists that we ought to critique or even condemn?

Finally, the vignettes we have chosen are not just from the ministry of the Wesley brothers. Other scholars have discussed the Wesley brothers' involvement with prisoners extensively. By highlighting the work of other Methodists, both leaders and laypersons, in addition to John and Charles Wesley, our intent is to bring to mind all the people in our own day who labor with and love prisoners without recognition. Prison ministry is something into which all disciples of Jesus are invited.

## PREVENIENT GRACE AND PRISON REFORM

In Wesley's sermon "The Scripture Way of Salvation," he describes "prevenient grace" as "all that light wherewith the Son of God 'enlighteneth every one that cometh into the world'; showing every man 'to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with his God.'"<sup>13</sup> We confess that even a brief look at the way prisoners are treated in the United States challenges Methodists to recognize that our flawed human response to crime does little to cooperate with the prevenient nature of God's grace. We, as a society, have chosen to make it easier to see the sins committed by prisoners rather than see them as beloved children of God whose souls are in peril because of sin sickness. We, like John Wesley, need to open our hearts and our eyes to see prisoners as they are seen by God, as persons in need of healing and redemption. This change is necessary in us and as an example to the society around us, in order that we may stop standing in the way of God's prevenient grace. Through faithful discipleship that helps align us with our fallen sisters and brothers, we believe the light of God's prevenient grace can shine more brightly in our world for prisoners, returned citizens, their families, and those who have been harmed and with whom healing needs to be about restoration, rather than amputation, of relationships.

Wesley too trusted in the prevenient nature of God's grace and sought to reform a prison system in England to be more consistent with that grace. One had to strain one's eyes and ears to see and hear grace in the eighteenth-century prisons of England. Children as young as fourteen were condemned to death. Even the most minor of crimes—theft of six pence, forgery, snatching of a



woman's handkerchief—could be punishable by death.<sup>14</sup> At least 160 different felonies in the eighteenth century could result in capital punishment.<sup>15</sup> The conditions in prisons were so bad that the stench was something neighbors living close to prisons complained about and was reason enough for many to avoid the neighborhoods where prisons existed—to say nothing of going inside them.

The journal of John Wesley contains several examples where he sought to improve the conditions of prisons. In one instance, Wesley celebrated an exception to the dire conditions of prisoners throughout Britain. In a January 1761 letter to the editor of the *London Chronicle*, he noted the improvement of prison conditions at the Newgate prison in Bristol, which he witnessed a few months earlier in October. He carefully enumerated all the ways the prison had improved since his visit a few years earlier. He specifically praised the jail keeper of the prison and ended his letter with a probing question: "And does not the keeper of Newgate deserve to be remembered full as well as the Man of Ross [a famous philanthropist at the time]? May the Lord remember him in that day! Meantime, will no one follow his example?"<sup>16</sup>

Although he did not mention his name specifically in the letter to the *London Chronicle*, Wesley knew the jailer at Newgate prison in Bristol. He was a Methodist. Abel Dagge was converted to Christianity under the influence of George Whitefield in 1737. He deserves to be remembered by persons engaged in prison ministry today as the first Methodist employee of a prison system. Even from within "the system," he made a profoundly positive impact on the lives of hundreds of prisoners.

Wesley's letter to the editor concerning prison conditions is also noteworthy for having been written over a decade before prison reform initiatives started to gain traction in England with the passage of legislation in 1773 that permitted justices to appoint clergy to county jails and pay them a small salary. Further legislation to improve the situation for prisoners passed in subsequent years through the influence of John Howard's political activism.<sup>17</sup> John Wesley admired John Howard, a Calvinist Evangelical: "I had the pleasure of a conversation with Mr. Howard, I think one of the greatest men in Europe. Nothing but the mighty power of God can enable him to go through his difficult and dangerous employments. But what can hurt us, if God is on our side?"<sup>18</sup> The

praise Wesley lavished on Howard was reciprocated: "I saw in him [Wesley] how much a single man might achieve by zeal and perseverance, and I thought, why may I not do as much in my way as Mr. Wesley has done in his, if I am only as assiduous and persevering. And I am determined I would pursue my work with more alacrity than ever."<sup>19</sup> Here is a striking example of ecumenical friendship from the eighteenth-century Evangelical movement, of which both Wesley and Howard were a part. Christians seeking to enact the love of Christ in the lives of those whom society counts worthless encouraged each to work all the harder to make good on the teachings of Jesus.

Another friend of the Wesley brothers, Methodist preacher Silas Told (1711–79), advocated for reform in the English prison system in a different way than Wesley. In Wesley's journals, one searches in vain for an example of Wesley questioning the justice of the death penalty for any of the persons to whom he ministered "on the cart" or in prison cells. (Wesley did, however, implicitly question the value of holding debtors in prison for small sums and, together with other early Oxford Methodists, sometimes paid what debtors owed.) In contrast to Wesley, Silas Told questioned the justice of the death penalty on several occasions. That he did so may have been the reason why his autobiography was only published in 1806, twenty-seven years after his death.

In the early nineteenth century, as Evangelicals were gaining traction in their fight against the slave trade, it became common for Evangelicals in Britain to call for reform in capital punishment as well. Methodists joined the Capital Punishment Society to that end.<sup>20</sup> Silas Told called for leniency for persons who committed crimes when they were intoxicated, wrote letters to the king advocating that particular prisoners not be executed, and decried the injustice of the death penalty when he believed its victim was innocent. The following is just one of several examples of Silas's condemnation of capital punishment:

I return now to Mary Edmonson, who, as before observed, was tried by judge Dennison upon mere circumstances, as no positive evidence against her could be produced. However, I understood that the prisoner suffered very severe and rigorous treatment from the



judge, because she insisted upon her innocence and integrity, the judge still laying the murder to her charge, calling her a notorious vile wretch, assuring her that she would be d\_\_\_\_d if she denied the fact, as matters were so evident, particularly seeing that her apron and cap were found covered with blood in the copper-hole; yet, as she was condemned on circumstances only, and as I attended her to the place of execution, I have every reason to believe she was condemned innocent of the charge.<sup>21</sup>

It is important to stress that one of the most brutal depictions of punishment in Silas Told's autobiography was not of a prisoner like Mary Edmonson in an English jail, but of a Jamaican slave whom Told had watched suffer a brutal beating during his years as a British sailor aboard a slave ship.<sup>22</sup> In relating this story, it would not have been difficult for readers to see the relationship between the injustice of the slave trade and the injustice of the British penal system in a way analogous to how Michelle Alexander in our own day has sought to compare Jim Crow laws of the early twentieth century with incarceration today. The injustice in the criminal justice system is a racist injustice, which disproportionately affects African Americans and Native Americans in the United States.<sup>23</sup>

Whether it was in advocating for better prison conditions, recording the stories of those who were executed unjustly, or writing letters requesting more lenient sentences, these early examples of Methodist advocacy for prisoners can serve as inspiration today to continue the work begun so many years ago. God's grace can indeed "enlighteneth every one that cometh into the world" and can even enlighten a prison system too often seen as a place only where sin runs rampant rather than a place where God's grace still stubbornly resides.

As you consider your local jail or nearby prison, are there examples of goodness and grace promoted by employees at those facilities—correctional officers, wardens, defense attorneys—whom you could encourage much like Wesley sought to encourage Abel Dagge? There are often people in local communities who would like to volunteer to spend time with prisoners. Might there be a role for people from your church to participate in this ministry—or

to befriend correctional officers and to assist them in their discipleship? In reflecting on the story of Mary Edmonson in Silas Told's book, are there similar stories you could tell of prisoners or "returned citizens" that could help people in your congregation and community see them as God sees them rather than as problems to be solved or people to be feared? Can you use those stories to help people see political advocacy for prison reform today as integral to discipleship and not mere out-of-touch idealism?

## JUSTIFYING GRACE AND PRISONER EVANGELISM

Let's be honest. For many readers of this book who belong to denominations affiliated with the National Council of Churches of Christ, evangelism is not an easy subject to talk about. While some forms of evangelism are practiced in harsh and manipulative ways, often our mental picture of evangelism is based on caricatures of some of our more conservative sisters and brothers in Christ, which is neither fair to them nor helpful for our own growth in grace. We believe Pope Francis of the Roman Catholic Church got it right when he stressed, in his first encyclical, the *joy* of the Gospel as integral to evangelism. He was right too in diagnosing the problem of many pastors regarding evangelism. He wrote,

At times our media culture and some intellectual circles convey a marked skepticism with regard to the Church's message, along with a certain cynicism. As a consequence, many pastoral workers, although they pray, develop a sort of inferiority complex which leads them to relativize or conceal their Christian identity and convictions. This produces a vicious circle. They end up being unhappy with who they are and what they do; they do not identify with their mission of evangelization and this weakens their commitment. They end up stifling the joy of mission with a kind of obsession about being like everyone else and possessing what everyone else possesses. Their work of evangelization thus becomes



forced, and they devote little energy and very limited time to it. (*Evangelii Gaudium* 79)<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, it is important in ministry with prisoners that evangelism not be forced or fake but emerge from a deep life of discipleship, which desires that others also come to know and love Jesus. We believe early Methodists had that kind of depth and sincerity in evangelistic practice. It is a habit of heart and mind that needs to be restored by many people who identify with mainline Protestant denominations.

In addition to trying to promote prison reform—a task that bore little fruit in his lifetime—Silas Told was probably the most effective evangelist with prisoners in early Methodism. After hearing Wesley preach on Matthew 25:31–46, Silas was cut to the heart and resolved to do precisely what was said—to visit those who were in prison. Sarah Peters, doubtless a courageous woman, was responsible for taking him on his first visit to a prison.<sup>25</sup> Silas Told spent the next twenty-five years of his life trying to live out what he read in Matthew 25 and what Sarah Peters had revealed to him. John Wesley spoke at Silas's funeral and gave him effusive praise:

For many years he attended the malefactors in Newgate without fee or reward; and I suppose no man for this hundred years has been so successful in that melancholy office. God had given him peculiar talents for it, and he had amazing success therein. The greatest part of those whom he attended died in peace, and many of them in the triumph of faith.<sup>26</sup>

Notice how, in this quotation, Wesley's praise of Told is specifically focused on how he helped "death row" prisoners receive justifying grace and the gift of assurance. Indeed, for Wesley and the whole Methodist movement, it was vitally important to have a good death.

Helping people to receive assurance of their salvation was Wesley's own primary motive for engaging in prison ministry, as "A Word to a Condemned Malefactor" makes clear.<sup>27</sup> In this sermon, Wesley does not shrink from emphasizing the gravity of sin or the gratuitous nature of grace:

### "GET ON THE CART!"

Know yourself; see and feel what a sinner you are.... How is your whole soul prone to evil, void of good, corrupt, full of all abominations! You cannot atone for the sins that are past.... Nay, if you could live like an angel for a thousand years, that would not atone for one sin.... One thing is needful: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved!"<sup>28</sup>

Wesley's message, of course, is a simple one. Few sermons of Wesley's are as pointed as this one in diagnosing both the depth of the problem and describing the riches of God's justifying grace for the sinner. To the eyes of some today, the contrast Wesley makes between the sinner and the salvation offered might seem overly extreme. But remember that the hearers of these sermons were living their final minutes before death on the scaffold. There was little time to make subtler points. Eternal salvation was at stake.

We may very well choose different words from Wesley in sharing the good news of Jesus and we may do it differently, but it is still important to invite people to follow in Jesus' way. How would we witness both to the truth of sin and the hope of salvation with people from our communities today? It is not simply about plastering over past bad deeds. The crime and the suffering brought about by the actions of prisoners are real. To find places in communities upon their return, one must have clear-eyed honesty. Prisoners need to move toward repentance and restoration to right relationship with their neighbors. How do we offer love and forgiveness, the salvation of Christ and the acceptance of Christian community, and tangible freedom from the sin that damaged lives beforehand? Here is where Christian discipleship becomes a challenge for those on the "outside" as well as those on the "inside."

There is a necessity of remembering the worth of the individual as a beloved child of God by receiving and embracing those on the "outside" by the cleaning and clothing of the one who returns (see Luke 8:39). Where the imprisoned and the returned citizens are harmed for life with a criminal record that may prevent possible employment and present housing issues, the victims of crime, along with families of the offenders and victims, may be stigmatized and ostracized by yet another label. God's justifying grace



compels us to bring the liberative and redeeming power of the good news of Christ's life, death, and resurrection to these persons.

It is important to remember that evangelism is not—in the eighteenth century or today—only an evangelistic sermon or an intense one-on-one conversation where one is invited to “pray the prayer.” It would be a caricature of Silas Told's and Wesley's ministry with prisoners if we thought it consisted only in this. Told's autobiography relates how he established religious societies in prison, which met together to hear him preach and held one another accountable using the *General Rules* of the Methodists.<sup>29</sup> It is likely that in the context of these gathered communities, hearts were changed and new habits formed, which was and is the intent of Wesleyan discipleship in groups.

As we consider Silas Told's and John Wesley's evangelistic work with prisoners, we wonder how Wesley's preaching to prisoners affected his own discipleship. When prisoners received justifying grace and the gift of assurance, which was so important to Wesley, did these conversations themselves become a means of grace for Wesley to receive the assurance he had so struggled to attain earlier in his life and likely was something with which he continued to struggle? We cannot say for sure, but it is likely.<sup>30</sup> Throughout the ministry of John Wesley, and in the ministries of many who followed him, the model of ministry was not one of mere condescension; he did not understand things in such a way that he was going to others to save them. Rather, he believed that we are saved *together* by the grace of God. Ministry to others is always ministry *with* others. Since Jesus himself instructed his disciples to visit prisoners, Wesley undoubtedly understood this ministry as not only a means of grace for them, but also for those who went to the prison to be present with them.

We invite you to consider for yourself and to ask others with whom you minister—even prisoners or “returned citizens” themselves—what excellent evangelism would look like in a prison context or with persons who are recently released from prison. Perhaps, like the early Wesleyan movement, an invitation to evangelism ought best to happen in the context of what early Methodists called “class meetings” or “band meetings”—forms of small group ministry. A good example of a ministry to prisoners trying to do this today is Kairos Prison Ministry International, a

ministry with significant United Methodist and wider ecumenical participation. Weekend retreats are offered both inside and outside prisons for prisoners and their families to build a stronger sense of Christian community.<sup>31</sup> Being involved with such a ministry ought to be something that Methodists, if not all Wesleyans and all disciples of Christ, do quite naturally!

## SANCTIFYING GRACE: PRISON MINISTRY AND FAMILIES

Our growth in holiness as Christians can be either greatly helped or hindered by the people who are closest to us. For most of us, those persons are members of our families—parents, grandparents, spouses, brothers, sisters, and children. Families and friends of prisoners are often just as deeply impacted by the incarceration of their loved ones as prisoners themselves. According to Kairos Prison Ministry, “Spouses, parents and relatives of those in prison often ‘do time’ right along with their loved ones.”<sup>32</sup> Accompanying both friends and family members of prisoners through their challenges is also a critical ministry. Similarly, friendships can be very important for those prisoners who are estranged from family members. The healing of relationships between prisoners on the “inside” and the rest of us on the “outside” moves us beyond justifying grace into what Wesley understood as sanctifying grace.

The historical vignettes we share in this section are reminders that *our* growth in Christian sanctification is intimately connected to the “works of mercy” that we are privileged to show toward others. In Wesley's sermon “On Zeal,” such works of mercy were identified as even more important for our growth in holiness than the more typical acts of personal devotion (Bible reading, prayer, etcetera)

In a Christian believer *love* sits upon the throne,...namely, love of God and man [sic]...In a circle near the throne are all *holy tempers*; long-suffering, gentleness, meekness.... In an exterior circle are all the *works of mercy*, whether to the souls or bodies of men [sic]. By these we exercise all holy tempers; by these we continually improve them,



so that all these are real *means of grace*, although this is not commonly adverted to. Next to these are those that are usually termed *works of piety*: reading and hearing the Word; public, family, private prayer, receiving the Lord's Supper; fasting or abstinence. Lastly, that his followers may the more effectually provoke one another to love, holy tempers, and good works, our blessed Lord has united them together in one—the church.<sup>33</sup>

As this sermon excerpt illustrates, our work with prisoners can—and often does—result in further growth for ourselves as much as it helps those whom we serve.

One example of this happening in the life of Silas Told—and one of his most heartrending stories—involved his ministry with the Anderson family. Mr. Anderson was condemned to death for stealing sixpence when he was out desperately searching for work or food. Told was moved by the love Mr. and Mrs. Anderson shared with one another when he saw them at his preaching services in the prison. He accompanied Mr. Anderson to the gallows and, while preaching to his own congregation outside the prison, expressed his anger about “the unfortunate case of Mr. Anderson, who died for six-pence, being the first crime, if criminal, which I think not, were circumstances considered.” Told spent three days searching for Mrs. Anderson after her husband's execution and eventually found her in a small, dirty room that he described as “more nauseous than the cells of Newgate.”<sup>34</sup> Silas Told and his wife gave Mrs. Anderson a place to stay, helped her safely give birth to a baby daughter, and saw that she gained employment as a housekeeper.<sup>35</sup>

Silas Told relates that his experience with Mr. and Mrs. Anderson caused him to preach about it to a congregation beyond the prison walls. He did this to encourage his congregation's growth in holiness. Silas's experience of anger amid injustice can be understood as a “holy anger,” which he desired his congregation to embrace as well. Too many Christians in the United States today are not angry enough about the many injustices of the criminal justice system. Methodists and other Christians would do well to see growth in holy anger as just as important an example of growth in holiness as spiritual consolations through prayer.

John Wesley had a similar experience to Silas Told, one that similarly allowed him to relate the story to others and so to encourage their growth in holiness. In this case, it was a growth in a kind of “holy generosity” rather than “holy anger.” In 1759, shortly after the British invasion of French Canada, Wesley ministered to soldiers of his nation's enemy. Eleven hundred French prisoners of war were imprisoned near Bristol where Wesley was staying while finishing up a book project, the fourth volume of “Discourses.” He walked a mile outside of town and was appalled by what he saw.

[They] were confined in that little place, without anything to lie on but a little dirty straw, or anything to cover them but a few foul thin rags, either by day or night, so that they died like rotten sheep. I was much affected and preached in the evening on (Exodus 23:9), “Thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Eighteen pounds were contributed immediately, which were made up four and twenty the next day. With this we bought linen and woolen cloth, which were made up into shirts, waistcoats, and breeches. Some dozen of stockings were added; all of which were carefully distributed where there was the greatest want. Soon after, the Corporation of Bristol sent a large quantity of mattresses and blankets. And it was not long before contributions were set on foot at London and in various parts of the kingdom; so that I believe from this time they were pretty well provided with all the necessities of life.<sup>36</sup>

Wesley's journal here recounts both how his stirring encounter with French prisoners influenced his preaching to the people of Bristol as well as how these events resulted in the mobilization of Methodists and doubtless other sympathetic Christians to meet the needs of French prisoners. The French prisoners were not only strangers but also enemies of the British state.

Reflecting upon this event, one is struck by the fact that Wesley's action on behalf of the French prisoners was something of an accident. He was not in Bristol to visit them. His walk a mile outside of town appears more like a “study break” than an intentional foray



into a new ministry. It is a reminder of similar chance encounters we have with strangers in our land and also of how we too often fail to respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit to act like Wesley did. Wesley does not tell us what happened to the French prisoners he visited, and we do not even know if he could engage them in conversation. They were strangers and enemies, however, and he sought to love them in simple, practical ways.

Few people in the United States realize that there are approximately 74,000 noncitizens of the United States who are in federal and state prisons. This is about 5 percent of the total state and federal prison population.<sup>37</sup> This number does not include the 400,000 persons who are held each year in detention centers around the country operated under the auspices of the Department of Homeland Security.<sup>38</sup> Persons imprisoned by the U.S. military are also not included in either of these sets of statistics.

Wesley's encounter with French prisoners of war is a reminder of how so often ministry with prisoners is resisted by Christians because we allow our hearts to be shaped more by a vindictiveness toward our enemies (sex offenders, terrorists, etcetera) that demands punitive recompense than by Jesus' love for them that we are called to emulate. One of the most beautiful examples of Christians ministering to strangers occurred in a detention center in Seattle, Washington, in 2006. Twenty-two undocumented Chinese migrants were detained when they were discovered as stowaways on a container ship.<sup>39</sup> Chinese congregations in the Seattle area were at first embarrassed by their fellow countrymen for having immigrated illegally in this way, but they soon began leading a multicongregational effort to minister to their needs, both spiritual and material.<sup>40</sup> A number of these immigrants became Christians and some returned to China and other countries and even started new churches in their homelands as a natural outgrowth of the gospel they received.

## JABEZ BUNTING AND THE FAILURE TO LIVE OUT THE TEACHINGS OF CHRIST

The examples we have reflected upon so far in this chapter have all illustrated mostly positive dimensions of ministry with

prisoners. It is important, however, to also mention how, a few years after Wesley's death, the Methodist movement could also be mean-spirited toward prisoners. It is a reminder to us that sanctifying grace is also received when we confess our failures to love as Jesus loves and to live as Jesus lives. A story about Jabez Bunting illustrates this better than anything else we have read and serves as a call to confession for us when we feel or even act similarly out of a sense of fear or vindictiveness in our own day in a culture that sometimes seems to revel in the endemic disease of incarceration.

Jabez Bunting was the most influential leader in British Methodism during the generation after Wesley's death in 1793. In 1820, Bunting became president of the Methodist Conference in Britain at the age of forty-one.<sup>41</sup> He was, in many respects, a bureaucrat's bureaucrat, assiduous in his attention to detail and denominational finances, and precise in his preaching. Bunting was no friend of radical labor leaders, however. He was filled with dismay when he learned that six of the seventeen persons hanged for the Luddite uprising were sons of Methodist preachers and saw this as sure evidence that the spread of Methodism in Yorkshire had been superficial at best.<sup>42</sup> In the wake of the Peterloo Massacre of protesting workers in 1819, Bunting encountered a prisoner, Samuel Bamford, in the Lincoln jail who was facing charges of high treason for his leadership role in the Peterloo protest. Bamford and Bunting apparently had a brief exchange whereby Bamford informed the prestigious Bunting that Bamford's grandfather had helped introduce Methodism to the Middleton area. Dismayed by Bunting's cold response, Bamford wrote, "The reverend gentleman went away with his company without vouchsafing a blessing or a word of advice to me—not that I cared much about it—but I thought old John Gaulter, or little Jonathan Barker [earlier Methodist leaders], would not have done so."<sup>43</sup>

The difference in character—and understandings of the demands of Christian discipleship—between John Wesley and Jabez Bunting is striking. Both men faced people in prison who were despised because of their conflict with the British monarch and government. In Wesley's case, they were French (mostly Roman Catholic) prisoners during a war that was not yet safely distant from the previous century's struggles over whether Britain would be Protestant or Catholic in the religious divide of the day.



Bunting found himself close to labor strife that had him in dangerous proximity to those struggling for reforms against the laws and policies of the crown and government. Both men were challenged with the question of how to minister to prisoners who are despised by those with power—and how to do so when such ministry could call into question one's own safety. Wesley placed the demands of Christ's teachings above all else. Bunting ran the other way, siding with the powers that be and letting the gospel fend for itself.

## CONCLUSION

In the eighteenth century, the idea that work with prisoners was a constituent dimension of Wesleyan discipleship was not really a debatable point. John and Charles Wesley followed the example of one of their fellow Methodists and began visiting the Oxford prisons when the Methodist movement was still in its infancy. Ministry with prisoners was something that the Wesley brothers did throughout their lives. It was not limited to them either. George Whitefield, Silas Told, Sarah Peters, and many others were also engaged in ministry with the imprisoned. Such an "all hands on deck" call for work with prisoners was just as appropriate for the eighteenth century as it is today. The prison population skyrocketed in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century in a way not that dissimilar to what has occurred in the U.S. prison population since the 1970s.<sup>44</sup>

No time is unique in terms of the threats and terrors faced from within and without. A passing familiarity with history shows that the only thing "exceptional" about a given time is whether we live in it. The gospel of Christ Jesus lays a perennial challenge before Christians in every age: Will we see prisoners, victims, and their families as sacred to God or as castaways from civilization? Will we seek justice to restore individuals and communities rather than to punish for vengeance's sake? Just as the prisoner is challenged to turn away from the sin of crimes committed that transgress against God's children, we are challenged to turn away from the sins of hatred and indifference that we use to justify our standing in judgment of others rather than seeking their care, consolation, and salvation. Jesus says "do not judge." He also teaches

his disciples to "visit those who are in prison" (to care for their well-being). We get to decide whether we will stand with those like Jabez Bunting, who failed in this central aspect of discipleship, or whether we will stand with those like John Wesley and Silas Told, who took Jesus at his word. The place for our creativity lies in how we choose to enact the teachings of Christ—if we choose to engage that creativity at all. Love of enemies and care for prisoners is not an optional part of discipleship. It is a measure by which Jesus counts each of us as sheep or goats. Which will you strive to become?

## Notes

1. Cited in T. Richard Snyder, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 2.
2. Kenneth L. Carder, "Castle Prison and Aldersgate Street: Converging Paths on the Methodist Way" (unpublished address, February 5, 2009), pdf file; Richard P. Heitzenrater, "Prison Ministry in the Wesleyan Tradition," in *I Was in Prison: United Methodist Perspectives on Prison Ministry*, ed. James M. Shopshire et al. (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2008); Charles Yrigoyen Jr., "I Was in Prison and You Visited Me: The Prison Ministry of John and Charles Wesley and the Early Methodists," *Evangelical Journal* 29, no. 1 (2011): 11–23.
3. Harmon L. Wray, Peggy Hutchison, and Brenda Connelly, *Restorative Justice: Moving beyond Punishment* (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, 2002), 29.
4. Yrigoyen, "I Was in Prison," 14.
5. *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2012* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 77.
6. See "Mission Plan for Restorative Justice Ministries," in *Book of Resolutions, 2012* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 651–62; online version of text accessed October 3, 2017, <http://main.umc-gbcs.org/resolutions/mission-plan-for-restorative-justice-ministries-5034-2008-bor>.
7. Charles Wesley composed several hymns for "condemned malefactors." For an analysis of these hymns, see Joanna Cruickshank, "Singing at the Scaffold: Charles Wesley's Hymns for Condemned Malefactors," *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 56 (2007): 129–45.



8. Nearly fifteen years ago, the United Methodist Women focused on this theme of restorative justice in their Mission study for 2002. See Wray, Hutchison, Connelly, *Restorative Justice*.
9. "Criminal and Restorative Justice," in *The Book of Discipline*, 137.
10. The UMC General Board of Church and Society has had a partnership with Healing Communities for a number of years. See "Social-Justice Agency Forms Partnership with Healing Communities," accessed August 16, 2016, <https://www.umcsc.org/home/social-justice-agency-forms-partnership-healing-communities/>. For more information about Healing Communities, see <http://www.healingcommunitiesusa.com/>.
11. The founding of Prison PATCH is told in Wray, Hutchison, and Connelly, *Restorative Justice*.
12. National Black Methodists for Church Renewal began in 1968 to advocate for the interests and inclusivity of blacks in the UMC as well as to serve as the spiritual agitating conscience of the whole church. See Heather Hahn, "Black Caucus Commits to Increase Advocacy," accessed December 9, 2016, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/black-caucus-commits-to-increase-advocacy>.
13. John Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," accessed December 9, 2016, <http://www.umcmmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-43-The-Scripture-Way-of-Salvation>.
14. Robert F. Wearmouth, *Methodism and the Common People of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Epworth, 1945), 77–113.
15. Sean McConville, *A History of English Prison Administration, vol. 1, 1750–1877* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 58.
16. *The Works of John Wesley, vol. 21, Journals and Diaries IV (1755–65)*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 296.
17. McConville, *History of English Prison Administration*, 127.
18. Cited in *ibid.*, 79.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Cruickshank, "Singing at the Scaffold," 145.
21. Silas Told, *An Account of the Life and Dealings of God with Silas Told, Late Preacher of the Gospel: Wherein Is Set Forth the Wonderful Display of Divine Providence towards Him When at Sea; His Various Sufferings Abroad; Together with Many Instances of the Sovereign Grace of God, in the Conversion of Several Malefactors under Sentence of Death, Who Were Greatly Blessed under His Ministry* (London: W. Cowdroy, 1806), 93, 98.
22. *Ibid.*, 66–67.
23. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 526,000

African American men were serving time in state or federal correctional facilities in 2013. That is 37 percent of the overall 1.5 million imprisoned men. The National Council on Crime and Delinquency identified similarly disturbing statistics for Native Americans' incarceration rates, which are often under reported by mainstream media. Native Americans are incarcerated at two times the rate of whites in the United States. This is higher than any other ethnic group except African Americans. Christopher Hartney and Linh Vuong, "Created Equal: Racial and Ethnic Disparities in the US Criminal Justice System" (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2009), 3, accessed December 9, 2016, [http://www.nccdglobal.org/sites/default/files/publication\\_pdf/created-equal.pdf](http://www.nccdglobal.org/sites/default/files/publication_pdf/created-equal.pdf). For research questioning the extent of racial injustice in the criminal justice system in America, see Barry Latzer, *The Rise and Fall of Violent Crime in America* (New York: Encounter Books, 2016).

24. *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (Rome: Holy See, 2013).
25. Told, *Account of the Life and Dealings*, 79.
26. Cited in Yrigoyen, "I Was in Prison," 21.
27. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed., vols. 11–12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 179–82.
28. *Ibid.*, 180–81.
29. Told, *Account of the Life and Dealings*, 84, 89.
30. Kenneth L. Carder makes precisely this argument in "Castle Prison and Aldersgate Street: Converging Paths on the Methodist Way," 3.
31. For more information about Kairos Prison Ministry International, see <http://www.kairosprisonministry.org>.
32. Kairos Prison Ministry International, "Kairos Outside," accessed December 9, 2016, <http://kairosprisonministry.org/kairos-outside-womens-program.php>.
33. This excerpt is taken from Wesley's sermon "On Zeal," cited in Randy Maddox, "'Visit the Poor': John Wesley, the Poor, and the Sanctification of Believers," in *The Poor and the People Called Methodists*, ed. Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2002), 72–73.
34. Told, *Account of the Life and Dealings*, 107.
35. *Ibid.*, 105–9.
36. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed., vols. 1–2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 516.
37. Catherine E. Stoichet, "Immigrants and Crime: Crunching the Numbers," CNN, July 8, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/08/politics/immigrants-crime/>.



## THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATIONS

38. Detention Watch Network, "Immigration Detention 101," accessed December 9, 2016, <http://www.detentionwatchnetwork.org/issues/detention-101>.

39. Paul Shukovsky, Brad Wong, and Kristen Millares Bolt, "22 Stowaways Nabbed at Port of Seattle," *Seattle Pi*, accessed April 5, 2006, <http://www.seattlepi.com/local/article/22-stowaways-nabbed-at-Port-of-Seattle-1200407.php>.

40. See "Celebrating World Refugee Day: Serving Detainees in Seattle," accessed December 9, 2016, <http://www.worldrelief.org/blog/celebrating-world-refugee-day-discipling-detainees-in-seattle>.

41. David Hempton, "Jabez Bunting: The Formative Years, 1794–1820," *Religion of the People: Methodism and Popular Religion, c. 1750–1900* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 107.

42. *Ibid.*, 100. The Luddites were a group of workers who, among other things, sought to sabotage industrial equipment, which they perceived caused them to be put out of work.

43. *Ibid.*, 101.

44. McConville, *History of English Prison Administration*, 58.

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## IV ECUMENICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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