

# A CHRISTIAN CASE FOR PRISON ABOLITION

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The movement to abolish prisons comes from a recognition of the cruelty and dehumanization inherent in our system of incarceration, opposed to human dignity. Abolitionism in the United States developed historically from the fight for racial justice and a recognition that mass incarceration is a form of racial control.

Churches—especially majority-white mainline-Protestant and Roman Catholic churches—have largely remained outside the abolitionist movement, preferring to fight for abolition of the death penalty and prison reform.

It is appropriate that the fight for abolition be led by the most impacted people: formerly-incarcerated people, the friends and families of those who are or have been incarcerated, and communities of color who at higher risk of arrest and imprisonment.

But at the same time, Christianity offers powerful theological resources to the fight for abolition.

Looking at Christian theology with an eye to prison abolition not only brings new intellectual and spiritual resources to the struggle for liberation, but also opens up new dimensions of understanding about our own theology, scriptures, and tradition.

One powerful set of voices for the abolition of slavery—although by no means the only or most important one—was that of Christians, buoyed by the resources of faith. The resources of our faith can guide us to work for abolition today.

This document, based on slides for a church adult-education class, is intended to be an introduction to the Christian theology of prison abolition, particularly for liberal mainline Christians.

*Slides and text by Hannah Bowman for Christians for the Abolition of Prisons, [christiansforabolition.org](http://christiansforabolition.org), June 2019.*



## MASS INCARCERATION

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- Since 1960, the number of incarcerated people in the US has increased tenfold, to **2.1 million**
- Mass incarceration is “the new Jim Crow”
- **200,000 people** serving life
- **80,000 people** in solitary confinement
- **17,000 people** in jail in LA County

“Mass incarceration” is a concept that entered the liberal Christian vocabulary with the 2010 publication of Michelle Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow*. The concept refers to the fact that the United States incarcerates more people than any other nation—something Alexander attributes to the way our criminal justice system has taken the place of segregation-era Jim Crow laws as a system of racial control.

The number of people in prisons is shocking. The U.S. has more people serving longer sentences, especially life sentences, than any other nation. For the same crimes, we sentence people to more time under harsher conditions. (See *For Further Reading* for additional data on mass incarceration.)

The U.S. is nearly alone among democratic states in our continued support of the death penalty. And life sentences, especially life without the possibility of parole, is another

form of death sentence—to death in prison.

We also sentence people to harsher conditions. Solitary confinement, which the United Nations defines as torture if it lasts more than 15 days, is still experienced by thousands of prisoners, often for years.

Prisons are, by design, punitive, isolating, and dehumanizing. The cruelty of the system is built into its structures and goals.

Christians are realizing that ending mass incarceration is a moral fight the church must engage in. But churches are often not equipped with the theological resources to go far enough to make a difference in “setting the prisoners free.”

Prison abolition is a proclamation of the kingdom of God and of a different kind of justice based on the gospel of Jesus Christ. Not just a moral imperative for the church, it’s an instantiation of the new way of being that we are called to as Christians.



# FREEDOM FOR PRISONERS IS A PROCLAMATION OF THE REIGN OF GOD

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*Prison abolition is participation in the coming kingdom of God*



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The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

—*Luke 4:18–19*

When Jesus returns from the wilderness after his baptism by John and temptation by Satan and prepares to take up his ministry in Galilee, the first passage of scripture he reads to describe his messianic mission is this: “The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, sight to the blind, release to the oppressed, and the year of the Lord’s favor.”

“Today,” he continues, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

What does it mean for us that Jesus identifies his ministry with the arrival of the reign of God—a new age in which, among other things, prisoners are freed?

Of course, Jesus did not come as a political revolutionary overcoming Rome by force. Theologically, we say that the reign of God is both “already” and “not yet”—it has been inaugurated in Jesus’ life and the coming of the Holy Spirit and the church, but we don’t see the fullness of its liberation, its eschatological culmination, until the beautiful vision of the end of time found in the book of Revelation.

But Jesus’ quotation of Isaiah in Luke 4 tells us the profound truth that freedom for prisoners is the shape of the kingdom of God. And that kingdom isn’t just a “not yet,” but also a present reality in which we can participate. God’s reign is breaking through into our time. We participate already, proleptically (in anticipation), in the fulfillment of God’s kingdom.

Every time we celebrate Christ’s resurrection, the “first fruits” of the general eschatological resurrection, we are participating in the new reality: one where death is conquered and there are (as Jesus promises in Luke 4) no more prisons.

A politics that respects that new reality is abolitionist.

Lee Griffith writes in *The Fall of the Prison* that prisons in the Bible symbolize the spirit of death—the land of the dead is associated with graves and prisons. Opposition to prisons is a proclamation of the resurrection, that life has overcome death.

Prison abolition isn’t just a “nice progressive cause” for Christians to take up because it’s morally right. (Although our prisons are deeply cruel and immoral places, and we are morally bound to oppose them.)

Prison abolition is more than that: it’s a proclamation of a resurrection way of living. It’s a conscious decision to participate *now* in the coming kingdom of God. It’s a witness to our future hope made present reality.

Prison abolition is evangelism and a potent sign of our Christian hope.

But the liberation Christ promises in the coming kingdom is even more deeply rooted in the history of Israel:

## EXODUS, JUBILEE, AND “THE YEAR OF THE LORD’S FAVOR”

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- ▶ “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt”
- ▶ The foundational act of God’s covenant with Israel is the Exodus, the freeing of captives
- ▶ This act is remembered liturgically by Israel in the Sabbath/Jubilee years, when debts were forgiven and those in bondage set free (Leviticus 25, Deuteronomy 15)
- ▶ Jubilee is “the year of the LORD’s favor” that Isaiah and Jesus refer to

Based on Lee Griffith’s argument in *The Fall of the Prison*

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It was on the basis of God’s liberation of the slaves that a covenant was established with Israel, and it was also on the basis of that history of liberation that Israel was to observe the Sabbath and the Jubilee.... The proclamations of liberty to the captives were concrete social responses to God’s liberating activity in the exodus of Israel from Egypt.

—Lee Griffith, *The Fall of the Prison*

When Jesus talks about proclaiming “the year of the Lord’s favor,” he’s drawing on a long tradition in Israelite history of the “Jubilee” or “Sabbath” years.

The laws concerning Jubilee years, when land is returned to its former owners, slaves are freed, and debts are forgiven, are laid out in Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15:

*“At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts...If any of your people (Hebrew men and women) sell themselves to you and serve you six years, in the seventh year you must let them go free. And when you release them, do not send them away empty-handed...Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today.”—Deut. 15: 1, 12–13, 15*



(Generally the “Sabbath” years occurred every seven years, while the “Jubilee” are commanded separately to occur every fifty.)

As Griffith points out, this ongoing tradition of the Jubilee or Sabbath years is based in the fundamental narrative of the Exodus from Egypt. God’s freeing the people of Israel from slavery was the foundational act of the nation of Israel. Throughout the Old Testament, God identifies God’s self as “the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” The tradition of freeing slaves and forgiving debts was a liturgical reenactment of that foundational narrative.

And in our society, where mass incarceration is the legacy of slavery and prisoners are said to “serve their debt to society,” the tradition of Jubilee is a striking reminder that God’s command and promise are aimed toward the liberation of prisoners and the abolition of prisons.

## THE YEAR OF THE LORD’S FAVOR

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- ▶ Jesus declares that the liberation of Jubilee is fulfilled *today* (Luke 4:21)
- ▶ In biblical symbolism, prisons stand for the power of death. Jesus’ proclamation that prisoners are free is a proclamation of the resurrection—the powers of death are overcome
- ▶ Prison abolition lets us participate *now* in the power of the resurrection and the culmination of the coming reign of God

Based on Lee Griffith’s argument in *The Fall of the Prison*

# WHAT ABOUT SAFETY?

*Don't we need prisons to protect us from violence?*



## WHAT ABOUT VIOLENCE?

- Violence is contextual and motivated
- Prisons further victimize victims—e.g. women in cases of domestic violence
- Address the causes of violence in context with community interventions
  - Homeboy Industries
  - Cure Violence
  - Common Justice

The major objection to prison abolition is the question, “But what will we do to keep our communities safe without prisons?”

The first thing to recognize is that almost all violence is contextual and motivated. If we can understand what causes it and intervene in communities and situations where it is occurring, we can make a difference without prisons. Violence isn't just “dangerous people” harming others for no reason – it has a motivation that can be addressed, even when that motivation is wrong or irrational.

Programs like Homeboy Industries and Cure Violence (gang violence prevention) focus on motivation and context to prevent violence. Common Justice in New York uses a restorative justice process to address violence when it occurs.

In fact, our current system hurts those who are themselves victims of violence. Women who finally fight back against abusers, for example, are often incarcerated for murdering them in self-defense.

We can address and prevent most violence. But what about random mass killings?

# WHAT ABOUT SERIAL KILLERS?



- ▶ The number of serial killers/mass killers is very small.
- ▶ Even horrific crimes are motivated—address shame and isolation to help prevent violence and encourage accountability.
- ▶ For those who pose an immediate danger or will commit imminent further harm, using force to restrain them may be necessary.
- ▶ Such restraint must respect their dignity and be consistent with engagement—not banishing the problem away.

Even in most cases of “violent crime,” preventative or restorative alternatives may offer safety without incarceration. Danielle Sered’s book *Until We Reckon* offers specifics from her work about how restorative justice processes in response to violence make the entire community safer than prisons do. But what about seemingly unprovoked horrific acts? What about people who just can’t live safely in society?

First: the number of such people is very small. We start by addressing the much larger number of people who can live safely in the community with support. And as Dr. James Gilligan has written in his book *Violence*, even the most heinous acts of violence are motivated, usually by shame. To address the issue holistically, we need to find ways to address shame and isolation to prevent these acts of violence and address

them when they occur, rather than discarding the people who commit them. Violence is structural, and requires structural solutions.

But most abolitionists admit that restraint is different from punishment, and that sometimes we may need to use force to restrain someone from committing imminent harm. We must be careful in doing this, however. Any forcible restraint must respect the dignity of those we are restraining and engage compassionately with them, not just seek to banish them and the problem. The example of civil commitment of those who have committed sex offenses shows us that “restraint” can become another form of control and punishment if it’s not limited and tied to real treatment. Our goal is to help people become able to live safely in communities.



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The most legitimate function of prisons in our society is to hold people we cannot safely hold in our communities. The challenge...is to develop more and better community capacity to address harm so that we can break our reliance on prison without compromising our obligation to secure safety.

—Danielle Sered, *Until We Reckon*

This insight from Danielle Sered, the director of Common Justice in New York, the restorative justice program that works with those who have committed violent crimes to help them make amends and assure community safety, is essential to understanding why we seek abolition of the system of prisons, criminalization, and incarceration rather than reform:

The system isn't broken. It's designed to isolate and banish people from our communities, so it can never accomplish real justice in the community. God's justice, which restores those who have done harm to fellowship, is incompatible with the logic of imprisonment.



## **PRISONS BANISH AND ISOLATE, BUT GOD'S JUSTICE OCCURS IN COMMUNITY**

*Why prisons don't work and can't be reformed*



## WHAT IS ESSENTIAL TO REHABILITATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY?

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- Community relationships, especially family
- Education and communal action for the common good
- Dignity of the individual respected and valued
- Learning to use one's power rightly to repair harm

## WHAT DO PRISONS DO INSTEAD?

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| ➤ Community relationships, especially family         | ➤ Prisoners are far from family and community                    |
| ➤ Education and communal action for the common good  | ➤ Education underfunded; organizing seen as a threat to security |
| ➤ Dignity of the individual respected and valued     | ➤ Dehumanization for the sake of control                         |
| ➤ Learning to use one's power rightly to repair harm | ➤ Imposed powerlessness  |

The dirty secret about prisons is that they're not designed to encourage rehabilitation, making amends to those you have harmed, or what is known in the church as "amendment of life." They're designed to warehouse people and banish them from society.

We see this when we look at the specifics of what can help with rehabilitation of offenders.

The thing that the most prisoners report would motivate them to overcome addiction and avoid recidivism is wanting to be a good parent to their children. Parent-child bonds, along with family and community bonds more generally, are a powerful motivator. We are more likely to change to help those we care most about.

But instead of fostering or encouraging family and community bonds, prisons remove people from their communities and are located far away, making it almost impossible for incarcerated parents to maintain close relationships with their children. Not only does this needlessly victimize the children, it is also directly opposed to "rehabilitation."

Similarly, making amends to those you have harmed requires, as Danielle Sered writes, using your power rightly to repair harm where you have used it wrongly. But to do that, you must have the power to make amends—and prisons are designed around powerlessness and dehumanization. Prisoners are not encouraged to make "right use" of their power to repair the harm they did. Instead, they are given no power at all—and thus, no motivation or opportunity to change.

We know that education and building meaningful relationships inside prisons help prisoners re-enter society. But education programs are underfunded in prisons, because the retributive impulse

behind incarceration always pushes us to treat prisoners "worse." And attempts to build community within prisons always face the reality that community and solidarity among prisoners are seen as "resistance" and a threat to the system. Prisons want to keep prisoners isolated, because isolated people are easier to control. But none of this control helps make real amends to victims or provide any lasting justice.

The fact is that the retributive impulse behind prisons—the desire to make prisoners suffer for what they have done—will always be in tension with the rehabilitative impulse. And the inherent design of prisons—places designed to remove, banish, and isolate those who have harmed their communities—will always be opposed to the kind of engagement and relationship building which is a necessary precursor to real amendment of life and making amends to the victims of crime.

That's why the prison system can't just be reformed. It is fundamentally opposed to a community-based vision of justice. Prisons can be made less harsh or less inhumane, but they can't be reformed or redesigned to do something completely opposed to what they're meant to do.

As long as prisons are meant to separate, isolate, and make powerless those who have done harm, they preclude the possibility of justice and rehabilitation. That's why they need to be abolished.

And on Christian grounds, we know that isolation and banishment are not God's justice. The most famous parable about seeking out anyone who has strayed, the Parable of the Lost Sheep, occurs in the middle of chapter 18 of the Gospel of Matthew, a chapter entirely about justice, as Ched Myers and Elaine Enns write. God desires every offender to be brought back to justice in community, not lost or banished.

# WHAT ABOUT JUSTICE?

*Doesn't crime require punishment?*



## THE CROSS IS THE END OF PUNISHMENT—NOW AND FOREVER

*Jesus' death in our place ended the need for retribution*

But there's another argument for prisons: the idea that justice requires the punishment of offenders.

As we saw above, the desire for retribution gets in the way of rehabilitation for those in prison, as well as getting in the way of “restorative justice”—justice based on meeting the needs of victims rather than focusing on punishing offenders.

Traditionally, our judicial system has been more focused on punishment than on meeting the needs of victims. And that needs to change, through restorative processes that focus on helping victims deal with trauma and making restitution and amends to them.

But ultimately, our sense of justice also seems to require some kind of punishment. We don't want people to “get away with” doing harm without suffering themselves. We do not want to encourage a culture of impunity. And we often desire vengeance, to see those who have done harm suffer in a way commensurate with the harm they have done.

This is where Christian theology offers us serious theological resources. Atonement theology—the question of how Jesus' death on the cross reconciled us to God and one another—provides us with a way out of the endless cycle of retribution and points the way to accountability that's free from punishment.



## THE CROSS IS THE END OF PUNISHMENT

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- Violence imposes a debt: the person responsible owes something to the person harmed
- Retribution and the *lex talionis*: the debt is satisfied by punishing the person responsible
- The cycle of violence: “An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind”



## THE CROSS IS THE END OF PUNISHMENT

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- Substitutionary atonement: Jesus bore the punishment/debt for all harm in place of the responsible person, satisfying the debt and ending the need for punishment
- Just as Jesus’ death destroyed death, Jesus’ punishment destroyed punishment
- Restorative justice: **accountability without punishment**
- Justice, free from punishment, is the restoration of right relationship with God and one another

Here's the fundamental tension raised by retributive justice: Violence imposes a debt. The person responsible owes something to the person harmed. Sometimes this can be repaid directly through reparations or restitution. But sometimes the debt is intangible.

The traditional understanding of punishment and retribution ("an eye for an eye") suggests that the person responsible should be made to suffer in a way commensurate to the way the person they harmed suffered. This may not be in the same terms—as Christopher Marshall writes, an eye for an eye never really meant doing the same harm to offenders as they had done to their victims—but the principle of commensurate suffering underlies our understanding of punishment.

The problem, though, is that this further imposition of suffering starts a vicious cycle of violence. As Gandhi said, "An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind." Retribution increases suffering rather than healing harm—and as we saw above, in the case of prisons retribution gets in the way of healing harm or rehabilitating offenders.

The traditional Christian theology of substitutionary atonement suggests that Jesus bore the punishment for every sin when he died on the cross. This is usually understood to mean that he paid the debt

sinners owed to God—but in our context, it also means that he satisfied the debt we owe to one another. Jesus' suffering and death fulfill the commensurate retribution demanded by great harm.

What this means is that after the cross, there is no need for punishment—not eternally, and thus not temporally. Just as Jesus' death destroyed death, Jesus' punishment destroyed punishment. The debt of retribution was repaid for all time by Jesus.

Progressives are often (rightly) uncomfortable with substitutionary atonement. And other atonement theologies solve this problem in other ways: by emphasizing God's mercy, which we should share, or Christ's solidarity with victims of harm, or the way the biblical narrative shows God's unstoppable desire for restoration of all who are lost, so that justice is about the restoration of right relationships in community.

But substitutionary language can be useful in giving us a way of separating justice from punishment. We can imagine justice as "accountability without punishment." When freed from the need for retribution, we can think about what it means to hold offenders accountable to repair the harm they did, in terms that are not about imposing suffering upon them. This is liberation, justice, and abolition!

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Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

—*John 12:31–32*



## SO WHAT DO WE DO NEXT?

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- Advocacy for policies that set people free
  - Bail funds, sentencing, parole, decriminalization
- “Visit the prisoner”
  - Letters, Prism (LA County Jails), Get on the Bus, etc.
- Restorative justice
  - Victim-offender dialogue, RJ in schools, re-entry/COSA
- Build our own communities: empower ourselves to do justice

So what now? If we believe that God calls us to work for the abolition of prisons—a monumental undertaking—what can we do to start?

The first thing we can do is advocate for policies that move us toward decarceration. Not every “reform” proposal is actually a disinvestment in the prison system, but many are. We can work to reform sentencing, increase parole, abolish the death penalty and life-without-parole sentences, abolish cash bail, and decriminalize drug use and sex work. All these policy changes help.

But our call isn’t only to work for advocacy from a distance, but to get close to prisoners in solidarity and learn their needs. We can “visit the prisoner” by writing letters, by volunteering in prisons and jails as religious chaplains or education volunteers, by supporting the families of prisoners through programs like Get on the Bus, which takes the children of incarcerated parents to visit their parents in prison.

Getting to know incarcerated people is the most meaningful way to change our own hearts and minds.

We can take part in restorative justice programs, like victim-offender dialogue efforts, restorative justice in schools, and re-entry programs to help returning prisoners make new homes in their communities. One profound such program is the Circle of Support and Accountability model, which uses a circle of volunteers to support those re-entering society after a sex offense conviction.

But ultimately the most powerful thing we can do is build our own communities. Prisons exist because we don’t believe we have the resources to help one another and address harm when it occurs. But as we get to know one another and build deeper communities, we can empower ourselves to do justice: real, restorative justice that transforms and forgives.

That’s what living in the kingdom of God is.



## **GOD IS SETTING THE PRISONERS FREE —WE CAN PARTICIPATE IN GOD’S WORK**

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*Prison abolition is not just a moral obligation but a proclamation of faith that God will accomplish liberation*



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If, as we believe, the first certain Christian community was those three criminals and prisoners at their execution on Calvary, then we who call him Lord! Lord! must bear witness to His promise to the criminals and prisoners: “I tell you this: today you shall be with me in Paradise.”

**The good news from God in Jesus is freedom to the prisoners.**

—Will Campbell, *And the Criminals With Him*



## FOR FURTHER READING:

Prison abolition is a complicated topic, and this introduction has barely scratched the surface.

Further materials are available on the website of Christians for the Abolition of Prisons, [christiansforabolition.org](http://christiansforabolition.org).

And additional sources by topic are listed below:

- **Mass incarceration, sentencing, and prison conditions**

*Hell Is a Very Small Place Voices from Solitary Confinement*

ed. Jean Casella, James Ridgeway, and Sarah Shourd

Details the horrors of solitary confinement in prisoners' own voices.

*The New Jim Crow*

by Michelle Alexander

Identifies how mass incarceration is a tool of racial control.

*Locked Down, Locked Out*

by Maya Schenwar

A good overview to the inhumanity and injustice of prisons and sentencing laws.

- **Christian theology, atonement, and restorative justice**

*Rethinking Incarceration*

by Dominique DuBois Gilliard

Black pastor Gilliard draws on his experience to provide an introduction to mass incarceration and a biblical vision for restorative justice.

*The Fall of the Prison*

by Lee Griffiths

*Beyond Retribution*

by Christopher D. Marshall

Both Griffiths and Marshall present in-depth analyses of biblical perspectives on justice and punishment to argue for restorative justice.

- **Alternatives to prison for addressing violence**

*Until We Reckon*

by Danielle Sered

A must-read; Sered, the director of restorative justice program Common Justice, outlines why prisons don't truly make communities at risk of violence safer, and how restorative justice interventions work in practice to keep survivors of violence safe from further harm and to help them heal.

*Violence*

by James Gilligan

Psychiatrist Gilligan, who works with serial killers, draws on his experience to explain the motivations of horrific crimes and how we can help even the "worst of the worst" live safely in society. Essential reading to grapple with the difficult question of how to stay safe without prisons.

- **Next steps to take action**

Much of the work to be done is local: volunteering at prisons and jails, etc.

Critical Resistance is a national organization advocating for abolition: [criticalresistance.org](http://criticalresistance.org)

Some of the most effective immediate advocacy is donating to bond funds, which pay bail/bonds to get people out of jail when they've been held pre-trial. The National Bail Fund Network: [www.communityjusticeexchange.org/nbfn-directory](http://www.communityjusticeexchange.org/nbfn-directory)

Info on writing letters to prisoners:

[christiansforabolition.org/2019/01/21/letter-writing-guide](http://christiansforabolition.org/2019/01/21/letter-writing-guide)