

Religion and Recidivism

by

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Is there is a direct or indirect relationship between religion, specifically Christianity, and recidivism? Does faith in God influence behavior? Can God or a belief in God make a difference in a person's self image and or attitudes toward others to the extent that the overall life patterns become permanently changed for the better? The simple answer is yes.

To fully appreciate the rehabilitative value of faith in God we must first explore and define certain key terms. The first term is 'religion'. Religion is man-made. That is to say that a person invented a certain set of rules or an ethical system to control or influence society's behavior. Pollard states in her book *Ethics in Crime and Justice* that "there must be a willful and rational god or god figure before there can be a judgement of right and wrong, and thus before a religion can serve as the basis for an ethical system" (p. 37)¹. Generally speaking, I would agree. However, the supernatural power required to change a criminal mindset does not exist in a god figure invented by a mortal. Man-made religion and its resulting ethical system are useful to some degree in providing temporary behavioral change, but that's all it is - temporary since the human heart and attitudes have not been truly affected. Hence the behavior will eventually return to what it was prior to being influenced by man's self-proclaimed moral standards.

¹ Pollock, J. (1998) Ethics in Crime and Justice. California: Wadsworth, Inc. p. 37

The supernatural power that changes lives can only originate from a supernatural source - the creator, God. When using the second term 'God', I am referring to the God of the Bible, the only God known to have no beginning, yet whose existence and personal involvement in the affairs of mankind are validated via historical accounts and archaeological studies. There is considerable scientific, empirical data to support such a claim discovered by researchers having no loyalty or connection to Christianity². Although this line of reasoning is worthy of further development it is not, in itself the topic of this paper. Suffice to say there is a major difference between a man-made religion and the creator and God of the Bible.

The main point is this: only a true, supernatural God who is able to create the universe is able to change the heart and behavior of sinful man, criminal or not. The entire human race has the same problem in differing degrees. The Bible summarizes the condition of the human heart like this:

"There is none righteous, not even one. There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one. Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the poison of vipers is under their lips, whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness; their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace they have not known." (Rom. 3:10-17 nas). It is easy to see that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23 nas)³.

² Thompson, F. (1964) The New Chain Reference Bible; Archaeological Supplement by G. Frederick Owen, D.D., Ed.D, Kirkbride.

³ (1960) Holy Bible, New American Standard Bible; The Lockman Foundation. Carol Springs, IL

Even those unfamiliar with the Bible know that man has a sinful nature bent toward evil. Only by God's involvement in our lives can we hope to follow His command to 'love another'. A phony man-made god can not change the human heart. It has been tried innumerable times without success! Self-improvement efforts, or efforts to 'improve' others also fail. Improving one's lot in life through social programs doesn't usually work either. Why? Simply because the condition of the human heart is at issue here. Most other efforts to rehabilitate the criminal are disingenuous motion accomplishing very little if anything. If that were not true all the social rehabilitative programs would have eliminated recidivism by now! Recidivism is still with us at an all time high because, in part, we continue to dress up the superficial wounds and ignore the real problem - the human heart.

Recidivism will not reverse itself until the human heart repents (turns from sin). Confession (admitting to God the wrong we've done) and repentance coupled with a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is at the center of successful rehabilitation. New Christians are taught to obey God by following Christ, and to care more about the needs of others than for oneself - to treat others as you want to be treated, alas - the Golden Rule⁴. Pollock states (p. 47) that "In personal relationships, the ethics of care would promote empathy and treating others in a way that does not hurt them". She is speaking of personal relationships with other people, not with God. But the general idea holds true of both - personal relationships with others and with God. The Bible teaches us to obey God's commands such as 'love your neighbor' and 'the Golden Rule', something we can not do while behaving criminally.

⁴ Holy Bible, KJV (1611)

Pollard continues by describing the benefits of 'peacemaking' and the role of 'peacemakers ⁵,' both of which have strong ties to Biblical teachings. When criminals (and the rest of us) are concerned about making peace with God, our selves and with others, we will not normally be out disturbing the peace. So how do we as a society introduce the supernatural peace of God into a person's life, particularly a convicted criminal? First, we ourselves must know and experience the peace of which I speak. Then we must be willing to take a risk and share with the convicted criminal what the Bible says about having peace with God, peace within, and peace with others - to include those whom they have wronged. This never-ending task is taken up by volunteers and nonprofit organizations such as Behind The Walls Prison Ministry founded by NFL great, Bill Glass and Prison Fellowship Ministries founded by former white house hatchet man Chuck Colson. They are joined by chaplains and lay people nationwide who work in our jails and prisons bringing the Gospel (translated: good news) to those who want a change of heart and are willing to listen. The results of such efforts by both Christian workers and inmates are encouraging.

Take for example the Giddings State School, a secured correctional facility in Texas which houses close to 400 of the state's most violent juvenile offenders. When they first arrive, untold numbers are filled with rage and hostility resulting from years of neglect, exploitation, and all types of abuse. Some are 'throw away kids' with heavy emotional 'baggage'. Many leave the institution after trading their deep-seated anger and brutality for a 'calm and reflective sense of responsibility⁶. The state calls it 'resocialization'. Staff Chaplain Jerry Reeves calls it a 'transformation'.

⁵ Pollock, J. (1998) Ethics in Crime and Justice. California: Wadsworth, Inc. p. 47

⁶ Becky, B. (Fall 1999) What Were They Thinking? Jubilee, Prison Fellowship Ministries, 7-8

He quotes the Bible (John 8:32) when he says, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free!" What Chaplain Reeves does, along with several other professionals, is show the young criminals the truth - truth about themselves, their past, their future, and about a God who loves them and is willing to forgive them. The chaplain introduces them to a God that can restore their broken lives. He does so one kid at a time. The results are sometimes considered miraculous. God's love and forgiveness are free; the miracles are not. The baggage must be opened and explored forthrightly. No mind games, no nonsense, no social government handout to make things easier. If this incarceration is to be life changing, the young offender must be willing to do his part. Nothing short of 110 per cent effort will do.

"Giddings programs run on two general principles of change; you [the inmate] must face up to the truth of who you are, and you must take responsibility for your attitudes and behavior"⁷. Offenders are guided through the exploration of their past to determine why they are the way they are. What caused their distorted paradigm? What happened to them that would account or contribute to their twisted sense of reality? What fueled their adolescent criminal behavior? They investigate possible causes that would relate to the present situation. No stone is left unturned; no closet left unopened. They are not looking for excuses; the staff will not tolerate weak, worn out 'pass the buck' reasoning. The young person is required to delve into his own soul and discuss what he finds with the professionals and other juveniles. More times than not, what is found is not pretty. In fact, it's downright scary. But for rehabilitation, emotional and spiritual healing to take place, it is necessary.

⁷ Becky, B. (Fall 1999) What Were They Thinking? Jubilee, Prison Fellowship Ministries, 7-8

Experiences such as role-playing provide avenues for introspection and healing. Inmates are required to reenact their crimes using foam 'weapons'. The others play the part of victim and fellow assailants. The actors realistically portray actual participants to enable the perpetrator to see, hear, sense, and feel what their victims experienced - only in a controlled and professionally supervised environment. Immediately afterward the group grills the young rebel with questions he must answer: Why did you hurt me? What did I ever do to you? Didn't you care if somebody got hurt? Would you want your mom to suffer like you caused Tom's (victim) mom to suffer? Would you want someone to put your mom through such an ordeal? What were you thinking when you decided to beat Tom with that ball bat? The juvenile is forced to face up to what he did.

Then the roles are reversed. The criminal becomes the victim and is instructed to act out what would be experienced - the fear, pain and bewilderment of being the unprovoked target of unfettered hate and rage. It is difficult to do this without feeling something. The reenactment and questioning instills some empathy for his victims. The counselors and peers then pursue another line of questioning that seeks to portray the victim as a real person, a human being who is now scared for life due to the crime perpetrated against them. The floodgate of emotions and tears may emerge anytime throughout this process, but it's not over. The 'real world' victims are invited to participate via Victim Impact Programs. The incarcerated listen to the victims face to face. As Chaplain Reeves stated, "When a kid realizes the full impact of what he has done, you can't devise a physical punishment that's as strong as a healthy conscience." And for most, that is what's been missing, a conscience.

University of Texas professor Jay Budziszewski maintains that people are created with fundamental moral principles that we cannot *not* know⁸. There are certain moral principles of right and wrong which we all know instinctively. The apostle Paul agrees with the author's assertion. Paul stated in Romans 1:18-21 that we know about God (and his standards) but suppress the truth in unrighteousness (sin). In other words, we know what we should do but suppress the truth (the conscience) to the point whereby we have no feeling of remorse when we do wrong. Once a person allows themselves to ignore their conscience, the rapid slide down the proverbial slippery slope begins. And with it follows 'normal emotions', i.e. feelings. The downward slide usually starts in childhood. It is the goal of Chaplain Reeves to reacquaint the offender with his feelings and conscience and the God who created them. To do that the offender is encouraged to look at himself long and hard, to include the dark side of childhood and those experiences that have shaped him. He begins to see the big picture. He also sees where the picture has been under or over developed. In time he begins to understand himself and others more. He begins to appreciate God's law, His love and forgiveness. As the juvenile accepts God Almighty as a personal loving God, he is then free to accept His forgiveness. When truth prevails, it *will* set the captives free. Provided proper follow-up is maintained once released, the likelihood of these juveniles re-offending is remarkably low.

The Giddings State School is not the only example of success in the lives of criminals. The adult population also shows signs of hope. A recent study concluded that inmates involved in Prison Fellowship Ministries programs while incarcerated are

⁸ Budziszewski, J. [The Revenge of Conscience](#)

less likely to recommit crimes than those who were not involved⁹. A key factor however was the level of involvement. Those who had committed their life to God (Jesus Christ) and were faithful to Him and the ministry programs were more likely to succeed on the streets by not re-offending. Those who refused Christian influence or simply not interested in God were at a higher risk of re-offending and thus returning to their quaint eight by ten accommodations.

Another study dealt with federal inmates who committed their lives to Jesus Christ and were subsequently trained as Prison Fellowship volunteer ministers¹⁰. The group was furloughed to Washington, D.C. to attend a two-week seminar sponsored by Prison Fellowship and supported by the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The study investigated long-term recidivism among this group and compared them to a matched control group. The main data source was U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation Records of Arrest Sheets for the years 1975 through 1986. The study showed that the prison minister group had a significantly lower rate of recidivism than the control group. "The seminars were most effective with lower risk subjects, whites, and women. The study suggest that 'religious programming' may contribute to the long-term rehabilitation of certain kinds of offenders"¹¹.

One important to note: to my knowledge, both studies were conducted by outside researchers and not by Prison Fellowship. The research thus far is clear. Inmates or incarcerated juveniles who turn to Jesus Christ have a better chance of staying straight than those who attempt to 'run their own lives'.

⁹ Johnson, B.; Larson, D. (1997) *Justice Quarterly*, 14, pp 145 - 166

¹⁰ Young, M.; Gartner, J. (1995) *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 22 (1/2) pp 97-118

¹¹ Young, M.; Gartner, J. (1995) *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 22 (1/2) pp 97-118

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