

# Redeemed on the Inside: Radical Accounts of *Ecclesia Incarcerate*

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## Abstract

Among various carceral governance structures meant to punish, educate, and rehabilitate is the carceral governance structure of the church with its dynamic structure operative in the reconstitution of prisoners' humanity. Presenting an interdisciplinary theological vision of this phenomenon found in the material content of personal faith, this paper presents preliminary results of twenty-four interviews of former prisoners who participated in the incarcerated church, interpreting the ethnographic data in dialogue with the ecumenical creed. Thus, it reinterprets in-depth interview data so as to begin presenting a coherent theological vision of what the members of the prison church both are and could increasingly become within the carceral context.

## Keywords

prison – church – ecclesia – incarcerate – ethnography – theology – methodology

## Introduction

Without rehearsing the history of the penitentiary and how the prison in the Western world came to exist in its modern form,<sup>1</sup> it is sufficient for the purpose of this paper to acknowledge from the outset that the current shape of the penitentiary in the United States arose as an essential part of variegated

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1 For this, see Norval Morris and David J. Rothman, eds., *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

religious and theological visions.<sup>2</sup> The visions gave rise to technocratic structures of how humans deemed guilty of some crime or another might be both *punished for* and in due course (if possible at all) *healed from* their sins or crimes. The American penitentiary has evolved over its more than two-century history into an ever expansive space that while maintaining seeds of its erstwhile religious impulses has become what Robert Ferguson calls “a peculiar version of hell... that the American separation of church and state has imagined.”<sup>3</sup> The impulses from the early penitentiary’s DNA have remained, however, even as the overall structure has evolved into a relatively open door to religious visitors of all kinds, with state-funded and volunteer-enabled chaplaincies, prioritizing Christianity’s dominant pride of place for ministry to inmates.

### Christianity within the American Prison Today

I came into this project assuming that Christianity today operates in prison largely as a colonialist-type venture—colonialism’s last gasp, as it were, where after the twentieth-century dismantling of movements venturing into nations to Christianize entire peoples, sometimes violently, these impulses have become more subtly oriented toward people who nobody wants to work with: prisoners in our own countries.<sup>4</sup> Current efforts at prisoner rehabilitation, insofar as they are operative, often employ religion (whatever its heritage in the modern penitentiary’s design and evolution) in utilitarian fashion, sanctioned by the state to otherwise serve their ends. These efforts also serve other ends as well. The Superintendent of the Office of Correctional Education in California Dept. of Corrections and Rehabilitation recently stated, “My experience tells me there is a clear connection between those involved in ‘the church’ and overall rehabilitation.”<sup>5</sup> This kind of legitimizing trope is often used to argue

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2 The most careful account of this in the United States antebellum period is given by Jennifer Graber, *The Furnace of Affliction* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

3 Robert A. Ferguson, *Inferno: An Anatomy of American Punishment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 1.

4 In a post-colonial moment amid the decreasing significance of forms of cultural Christianity, this does not preclude some prison ministers from forms of violence such as that mentioned by Dietrich Bonhoeffer from Tegel Prison, 30 April 1944, on the notion of the “religious rape” of “a few unfortunates in their hour of weakness.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 8*, ed. John W. De Gruchy (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), p. 363.

5 Personal email, 22 December 2016 (used by permission).

for a robust approach to prison ministry in spite of the variegated aims of those more directly involved in their actual operations.

It still seems that the presence of prison religion,<sup>6</sup> in its Christian versions, remains in many ways exemplary of a kind of colonialist repristination; yet the issue is more complicated. Various prison ministries, so called, and churches doing ministry in prisons are generally good things, it seems; but they are not central to the life and activity of, nor essential for designating, what some have begun to call *ecclesia incarcerate*.<sup>7</sup> This designation, deemed helpful for incarcerated believers developing a deeper sense of indigenous ecclesial identity, suggests that there is a reality within the prison that remains largely inexplicable by both social scientific observation and yet offers features that empirical research can indeed identify as *present*, yet ultimately without the thick description that theology might offer in accounting for this reality, especially in light of an ethnography. There is, I would like to argue, an altogether different order operating within the prison that both resists and subverts carceral structures, which considers the prison as a formal structure foreign to the essence of the church's life<sup>8</sup> and also notes the church's real existence operating among both formal and informal governance structures within the prison context.

6 Definitions of "religion" range from the social scientific study of faith practices in their material manifestations to the experience of belief and also sacredness/holiness. Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, eds., *Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 33. A helpful definition of religion *qua* theology is found in the fourfold rubric Helen Cameron provides as a method of nuancing various voices at play in any given theology. She identifies these as theology (or religion) that is "operant," or what people actually do; "espoused," or what they say they do; "normative," having to do with sources of authority; and "formal," which is the professional kind done by, well, professionals. Note the effort from Kent R. Kerley, ed., *Finding Freedom in Confinement: The Role of Religion in Prison Life* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2018).

7 See a preliminary attempt to account for this phenomenon in the dynamic California context: Jason S. Sexton, "Toward a Theology of California's *Ecclesia Incarcerate*," *Theology* 118 (2015): 83–91. See the term's usefulness acknowledged in Linda Lee Smith Barkman, "Hidden Power and False Expectations: Muted Group Dynamics Between Prison Ministry Volunteers and Incarcerated Women," unpublished PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2018.

8 Compare Augustine's "earthly city" and the aims of the modern secular state, with the heavenly "city of God." Augustine of Hippo, "The City of God," in *St. Augustine's City of God and Christian Doctrine*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Marcus Dods, vol. 2, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*<sup>1</sup> (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 11.1 (p. 205). A historical point also worth noting is that the church *qua* church does not build prisons for society; the state does. Furthermore, aside from the increasingly complicated forms of the modern penitentiary, the prison has a history as a religious phenomenon whereas the jail is almost exclusively local, for short-term punishment or awaiting trials, and

## Theological Methodology for Understanding the Prison Church

The ethnographic feature of this study is informed by twenty-four in-depth interviews with twenty-three individuals who served prison sentences and participated in the prison church at some level, most whom were heavily involved in the church's life on "the inside." Thirteen of these spent time in adult male prisons (serving from one to thirty-four years); three served time in women's prisons (serving from six to thirty years); and seven served time in juvenile state prisons (serving from one to eight years). One of these was a repeat interview, and some went longer than the planned one hour session. Accordingly these interviews provide insight into understanding precisely how the community called "church" functions in the carceral setting.<sup>9</sup>

While a range of sociological features of the phenomena under investigation provides considerable material for reflection, based on the collected first-hand reports of these accounts of the prison church, of primary interest for this essay is to locate the church's *theological* reality as discernable through the lived experiences of participants in its life. This approach, then, is not ethnography in a traditional anthropological sense, but works with an inclusive mixed-methods hybrid methodology for its inquiry, combining "life approach" oral history together with semi-structured interviews and analysis, meanwhile

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thus does not reflect the same kind of comprehensive punishment cum healing/rehabilitation structure that the penitentiary would.

- 9 The interview portion of the research for this article was conducted by the author between December 2015 and March 2016 who served as PI of the project, "Faith in the Lives of California's Prisoners," which received approval from the California State University Fullerton Institutional Review Board to conduct research on human subjects for the purpose of making this research available to scholars and the general public. I am grateful to Matt Englar-Carlson, Natalie Del Rio, and Carie Rael for assistance with this process. The semi-structured interviews asked the following questions for each interviewee: What was your experience with the church before incarceration? What comprises/constitutes the prison church? (what is it?) How does one become a member of the prison church? What does leadership and discipline look like? What does education, evangelism, prayer, worship, conversion, sanctification, cooperation, interreligious dialogue, and internal conflict resolution look like? Is the prison church pacifist or activist? How does it best prepare its members for life as part of the non-incarcerated church upon release? What gifts do its members exercise most visibly? What benefit does it offer to the wider non-incarcerated church? What gifts does the prison church uniquely offer to other inmates, guards, prison staff, and dominant prison gangs? How many of the prison church recidivate—do they remain part of the church upon recidivating or when released? What are the challenges members of the incarcerated church face when released? What does the prison church offer the state and formal governance structures in prisons?

participating in the lives of these formerly incarcerated research subjects insofar as they are currently part of both the wider society and, in many cases, the non-incarcerated church. In other words, they could very well be (and in some sense *are*) members of my church, notwithstanding the participatory understanding this writer shares as a researcher who also experienced prison church life during an erstwhile three-year incarcerated experience, yielding a particular kind of empathy, understanding, and solidarity with the interview subjects.

Ethnography's emerging role in theological reflection has undergone much development in the last decade or more, with advocates arguing for the usage of multiple research tools, among which are qualitative methodologies from areas including criminology and the social sciences more generally, which places research value on participation, immersion, reflection and representation, thick description, an active participative ethics, empowerment, and understanding.<sup>10</sup> Using primarily an inductive methodology through interviews and other means, ethnography in service to theology "seeks to discover what truth or valuable insight is found within specific locations—discovered in communal and individual stories, cultures, practices and experiences," providing "a path *by which* truth emerges." As such, it exercises humility amid sustained, attentive, and careful observation; reflexivity in the form of self-critical awareness and accountability; collaboration that pushes the notion of authorship; and the audacity that takes effort and pragmatic solidarity.<sup>11</sup>

The study informing this essay can be marked out as ethnographic because it works with a common shared ethnographic experience being developed through interviews of formerly incarcerated participants in the life of the prison church. The participatory dimension includes not only what is shared among interviewees as they recount their participatory experience from their former carceral experience, but also a reflexive engagement of the shared prison religion experience between the interviewer and interviewees, often relived during the interviews.

This paper also presents initial reflections on the twenty-four interviews, interpreting ethnographic and historical interview data in dialogue with a reverse-reading of the church's ecumenical Creed for critical analysis. The ecumenical Creed "has come to refer to a statement of faith, summarizing the

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10 See Julie Scott Jones and Sal Watt, eds., *Ethnography in Social Science Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 6, cited in Pete Ward, ed., *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 6–7.

11 See these developed as, "A Working Definition of Ethnography" in Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2011), pp. 16–27.

main points of Christian belief, which is common to all Christians.” Different from denominational particularities, the Creed “pertains to the entire Christian church, and includes nothing more and nothing less than a statement of beliefs which every Christian ought to be able to accept and be bound by.” It is, accordingly, “a concise, formal, and universally accepted and authorized statement of the main points of the Christian faith.”<sup>12</sup> While settled in the fourth century as a matter of considerable unity amid doctrinal controversy, it remains the most universally agreed-upon statement of the entirety of the Christian tradition, and thus is the most coherent statement about what the church believes, and its own very life constituted as such. The Creed, therefore, provides a methodological tool for understanding what the incarcerated church believes, however tacitly known by participants in its life. Thus, it becomes a methodological mechanism for reinterpreting interview data with a goal of discerning a coherent vision of what members of the incarcerated church both are in their locally-constituted carceral-ecclesial lived experience, and also what they *could be*, rendering this robust theology for the prison church situation today; thus not merely descriptive (comprised of lived experience) but equally prescriptive (comprised of a meaning-making vision).

While different from straightforward liturgical reading, the reverse-reading of the Creed is chosen for analysis with this study because it more properly accounts for the experience of the prison church’s life from its own experience. This is a theological accounting because its interpretive cues are taken from the directional flow of the credal movement, highlighting an order of directional movement of divine action: from eternal generation within the divine life to the divine incarnation, “Not for Himself then, but for our salvation.”<sup>13</sup> T. F. Torrance notes that for Athanasius (296–373), “the economy of the incarnation,” “the economic condescension” of God the Son, or “the advent in the flesh,” or “the divine and loving condescension and becoming man” all denote “God’s loving assumption of our actual human nature and condition in space and time, all for our sake.”<sup>14</sup> Grounded in God’s eternal life, conceptions then arise from “the evangelical pattern or economy of God’s saving revelation in

12 Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 2d ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 16–17.

13 Athanasius of Alexandria, “Four Discourses against the Arians,” in *St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. John Henry Newman and Archibald T. Robertson, vol. 4, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*<sup>2</sup> (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1892), 2.55 (p. 378).

14 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), p. 148.

history and conceptions of God which are expressions in time of eternal personal distinctions in God.”<sup>15</sup> These, along with the divine giving and receiving also of the Holy Spirit by the Son first, by whom we are made recipients of the divine life and exchange of love. This action of the Holy Spirit, fully present in the divine life and also, by the reception and indwelling enables the *theopoiesis*, “to be made partakers of God beyond ourselves,” and thus the reverse movement is underway, with “the indwelling of the Spirit mediated to us through Christ [as] the effective counterpart in us of his self-offering to the Father through the eternal Spirit.” Here, Torrance goes on to note, is where Pentecost must be regarded “as the actualization within the life of the Church of the atoning life, death, and resurrection of the Saviour.”<sup>16</sup> And this actualization brings us into a closer proximity with the lived experience of the incarcerated church and the new, redeemed lives of their members, lived into the divine life. Trinitarian action, then, both within the divine life and the economy of salvation as an outward expression of that life—*for our salvation*—is comprised of a movement of divine action and love, which does not proceed apart from a vision of returning.

In conducting this project then, I aim to assemble ethnographic data into a synthetic, coherent exposition capable of accounting for various extant phenomena as understood to be *sub ratione dei*, finding carceral realities not only suggestive of theological questions, but giving account of a redemptive reality that both resists and subverts the order of things in the penitentiary such as they have become in our complex era of mass incarceration. The dogmatic ecclesiology this project envisions, then, does not purport any kind of industrial-strength ecclesiology, such as they come from various traditions accounting for their beliefs and actions in any official ways, but rather is what I’d prefer to describe as a dynamic nonconformist missionary ecclesiology displaying a different kind of power in a setting that arguably St Paul might refer to as a “present distress” (1 Cor. 7.26). Its connection to the Creed is more than fashionable but quite possibly the best way to understand the gathered interview data and other insightful source material (e.g., sociology) to account for the ontological reality that designates the substantial, localized radically transformative body about which holy scripture testifies: that all of this is “from God” (ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, 1 Cor. 5.17).

15 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), p. 7.

16 Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, pp. 189–190.

### What I've Learned about these Research Subjects

The individuals interviewed for this project have mostly been out for a while (some a very short time, however, including Kevin whom I interviewed only a few weeks after his release) and were willing to be interviewed. They are now largely facing the system and desire to tell their stories. Some initial contacts I made based on a variety of leads were unwilling to be interviewed. Two requested anonymity, and one ultimately asked that after the interview I not use any of the interview material at all.

Those I interviewed who were willing to allow me to use the material have a number of unifying features. They have had relative success since release. They are prison reformers, activists, and generally-speaking have had some positive experience with the church—inside and outside—as complicated as these relationships may be. They were thus sympathetic with my research project and willing to offer reflections on what were deemed positive (though not entirely) experiences with the church on the inside, and seemed on all accounts to have meaningfully participated in its life.

I anticipated that through the investigation I would see the same church that I also experienced on the inside, during my three years in the California Youth Authority facility in the 1990s. So I went into this project seeking to clarify and test some things that were part of my experience, and wound up wrestling through more questions, which has provided further clarity of the significance of this project giving an interdisciplinary account of the church's relationship to the prison as well as a theological vision of what the church might continue to be in relation to it, and especially as it lives its life out *within* the carceral setting.

### Challenges Inherent to this Project

This project has generated a number of readily observable challenges. One of the struggles in conducting interviews has been my own inclination to connect on a personal level that has from my own perception removed an otherwise natural distance often assumed for critical objective analysis. As an academic scholar and theologian rather than a trained ethnographer, I also served time in prison, which invokes overlapping lines that interpret carceral experiences in light of my own experience and those of others, which have been somewhat challenged as I've taught courses on the history of the prison and have visited both active and closed prison facilities. But I cannot directly experience the same situation that others have experienced. I only served time with one of the



interviewees, and can only truly employ immersive participatory research if I (and they) become incarcerated again. My experience having been incarcerated *as a juvenile* also further shades this, as does my status as a white Protestant middle-class male.<sup>17</sup>

Another challenge has been the process of collation, which has much more work to do, accounting for particularities of each facility and its life in particular times, showing development *over time* amid a massive range of variables in the American prison system, and especially in the California Department of Corrections. These factors and the limitations of the interview format also meant that it was impossible to get a clear full picture from everyone. And yet because these were *formerly* incarcerated people, I think they felt freedom to be completely honest (in some cases perhaps too much),<sup>18</sup> and critically reflexive in a process that some found therapeutic. Yet their stories allowed me forms of meaningful reckoning with the one, holy catholic apostolic church, even though there remain different competing factors that undermine a coherent ecclesiology, whether developing indigenously or else imposed from without.<sup>19</sup>

### The Theology of the Prison Church—Analysis

For the purpose of the interviews, and notwithstanding any potentially critical or corrective engagement that could be done with the interviewees either on

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17 Being incarcerated as a juvenile is often deemed a last chance to maintain some sort of societal dignity post-carceration—many adults lose this entirely and are perceived as societal throw-aways.

18 For example, the case of the interviewee I interviewed 20 January 2016 who afterward asked directly that I not use any of his material after its content was perhaps *too revealing* of his carceral experience. In his case, the matter of concern seemed to relate to the disclosure of violence, as well as ongoing frustration with his post-carceral experience, including difficulty finding work, finishing a university degree, and caring for a young child, all while seeking to follow God, as evidence from the week after the interview he made something of a spontaneous pilgrimage to Redding to experience the ministry of the Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry. For a recent profile of this ministry see Molly Hensley-Clancy, “Meet The ‘Young Saints’ Of Bethel Who Go To College To Perform Miracles,” *BuzzFeed News*, 12 October 2017, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/mollyhensleyclancy/meet-the-young-saints-of-bethel-who-go-to-college-to>.

19 By chaplaincies, for starters, or from volunteers, or others drawing in strong ways from theologies foreign to the localized carceral situation with its particular needs and localized logics.

theological, ethical, historical, or other grounds, it's worth noting that questions of interviewees were structured so as to not intentionally solicit any distinctly particular theological information. In other words, with prior approval from an Institutional Review Board from the university, interview questions were more generic, trying to evoke experiences rather than their own posterior reflections on the experience. In short, the questions weren't trying to lead interviewees on, drawing out material that would map onto any particular kind of theology that I'm trying to develop, which this work aims to do more properly as this ethnographic work continues to be analyzed. While some interviewees had indeed had more formal theological training on the inside (and some since release), I tried to solicit information that was part of their *lived experience*, which I have begun to integrate into this theological account of the ecclesia incarcerate as read through the ecumenical Creed.<sup>20</sup>

### *Resurrection and Life Everlasting*

Together with the final clause of the Creed's third article, prisoners are quick to acknowledge the activity of the Holy Spirit in the prison, as the one who brings about conviction, revelation, discernment, and empowerment.<sup>21</sup> It is not the work of the chaplain, or elders, or other evangelists within the church, as active as these may be. There's a general understanding inside that, "85 percent of the men in prison have some type of faith, mostly Christian faith," according to Robert Dixon. This may be true, in a setting where every prison averages over one "incident" of inmate-on-inmate violence each day,<sup>22</sup> which leads people to ask big existential questions. Armando informed me, "There's always something going on" amid the underground economy on the inside, and so folks often do not freely express their faith among the various carceral structures.<sup>23</sup>

20 See Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney, and Clare Watkins, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010).

21 Interview with Robert Dixon, Los Angeles, 12 January 2016.

22 According to the CDCR Office of Research, the last record of "Inmate Incidents in Institutions" was given from Calendar year, with the statement offered: "Due to restructuring of the incident database, this report has been suspended, until such time as a new incident report can be created," [http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/Reports\\_Research/Offender\\_Information\\_Services\\_Branch/Offender\\_Information\\_Reports.html](http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/Reports_Research/Offender_Information_Services_Branch/Offender_Information_Reports.html). According to David Skarbek, "Violence is an important mechanism for allocating resources" (*The Social Order of the Underworld: How Prison Gangs Govern the American Penal System* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2014], p. 82), and perhaps is one of the most important features of the underground economy.

23 Interview with Armando Escobedo, Chatsworth, California, 15 February 2016.

One prisoner told me of a time when a preacher from the outside offered an altar call, and a number of inmates stood up and “gave their lives to God in front of the yard,” yet were told to get back in line by gang leadership, “reprimanded for it and they took some punishment for it,” relegating them so that they “fell straight into rank.”<sup>24</sup> Gangs cannot have their “soldiers” becoming weak and so in higher level institutions gangs often strongly oppose evangelism, even though faith may be experienced and they often will respect it as such. But as such, in the case of those who fail to actively “program”<sup>25</sup> and especially in the case of those who rejoin more subterranean ways of the prison, or recidivate, the question raised by some inmates is whether they truly had faith at all.<sup>26</sup>

These factors highlight challenges often leading to poor experiences of church life on the inside, especially when the church fails to organize, or discipline its members, along with problematic or corrupt chaplains. Poor experiences of the church inside also happen in cases of excessive lockdown, and of short-term carceral situations (three years or less). And yet Christians on the inside did discipline one another, with forms of teaching and discipleship where believers would provoke one another in strong ways,<sup>27</sup> an acceptable dynamic because incarcerated believers have a robust understanding of both God’s power to change lives and the edge on which they live, bringing a sense of dignity in all-around sanctifying ways.

The operative actors within the prison, from inmates to guards, watch everything and everyone very closely. Prisoners always watch what’s happening, aware when the “genuine Christians” are living their lives as part of the church. These people are often deemed more serious, they “walk the walk,” often connect to and receive special encouragement from the outside world, with volunteers and others within the prison, and serve often in peacemaking capacity, which contributes to how the church is perceived by folks on the yard, the politics of which they’ve “received a pass” to avoid if they’re serious about joining the church.

The prison remains an intense setting where in older facilities stories of ghosts (those murdered or executed), and experiences of the supernatural,

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24 Ibid.

25 I.e., preparing for release and developing healthy pre-parole habits.

26 Interview with Chris Smith, Wasco, California, 13 February 2017.

27 I noticed this recognition of the need to organize in several interviews. For one example, “there was no discipleship and no growing in the Lord, and this became an issue. So that’s when I started teaching this discipleship group of mine with eight or ten women who wanted to be leaders.” Interview with Linda Barkman, Pomona, California, 22 December 2015.

dreams, the demonic are often not far from the inmate experience, however this relates to mental illness and the erosion of the inmate's mind. The experience of real power is also on display, not only in the size and cunning capabilities of the incarcerated figures (and the guards), but also including the kind of power that has taken the lives of other human beings, either within or outside of the prison.

In some cases, conversion was after a long sentence and quite radical and confrontational, including man-to-man summoning to figure out whether others will go to heaven or hell if they were to die in the prison;<sup>28</sup> in others, conversion was more gradual, with literature and ongoing conversation, facilitated by published devotional literature like *Our Daily Bread*, a Bible, and conversations until 4 a.m.;<sup>29</sup> for others still it was something settled at the beginning of a sentence;<sup>30</sup> and others were summoned by more ambitious inmates to radically experience God's love.<sup>31</sup>

That said, most prisoners live in fear and know they are among those living in rebellion, addiction, despair, and punishment, the latter being what some equate with their early life religious experience: "I always related punishment with Catholicism," said Albert Lujan.<sup>32</sup> Often short-timers find it much harder to follow Christ in prison, because they're in survival mode and much more intensely negotiating themselves than they would be if they had been in for a long period and were known throughout the prison, and respected. But for most, conversion is said to be "pretty dramatic,"<sup>33</sup> often a radical thing, with resurrection and life everlasting in view, especially as the anticipation of societal reentry foreshadows the future resurrection.

### *Forgiveness (Remission of Sins)*

This is understandable when such a radical paradigm shift takes place, such as what is found in the experience of forgiveness.<sup>34</sup> Some erstwhile religious experiences (esp. among Catholics) offered inmates a sense of getting what

28 See the description of the young evangelist given in the interview with Benito Pena, South Pasadena, California, 26 February 2016.

29 Interview with Sylvester Wright, Los Angeles, 23 January 2016.

30 Interview with Kevin Gentry, via phone in Oakland, California, 14 March 2016.

31 Interview with Albert Lujan, South Pasadena, 18 March 2016.

32 In prison were men "living a life of violence, living a life of addiction, and living a life of rebelliousness, living a life of despair if you will" (ibid.).

33 Interview with Sylvester Wright.

34 See Hannah Arendt on forgiveness as the only thing that can put an end to the current continuum and begin anew: *The Human Condition*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 241–42.

they deserve in prison, having committed “sins” that they and others within consciousness of their activity knew were wrong. And yet the experience of forgiveness is often absent in the carceral setting, an alien concept exacerbated with so many actively fighting their cases with little results. The best thing often to hope for is a commuted sentence or change in law, frequently occurring in California. But never forgiveness—one of the great American virtues that the prison as “secular version of hell” excludes inmates from.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, forgiveness is usually out of the question... until it isn’t.

However elusive it may be, forgiveness resides in the Christian inmate’s subconscious.<sup>36</sup> There is a sense in which forgiveness is experienced. Whether convicted of and sentenced for actual crimes committed or not, being in the prison means being involved in the underground economy.<sup>37</sup> Linda Barkman received a lengthy sentence as a young adult for something she didn’t do, and cherished the experience of forgiveness. And the only moment in my interviews where I saw a lifer who served thirty-four years cry with deep sobs was when Albert described his conversion experience. He recounted how he didn’t ever think he could be forgiven, having committed what he deemed the unpardonable sin (murder) and thus he at one time believed he was getting the punishment (or purgatory) he deserved through his imprisonment. But everything changed when he understood the Holy Spirit empowering him to listen to a [somewhat reckless] young man telling him that God loves him. This led to him attending chapel to listen to his friend sing in the choir, which in turn led to him going back to the Catholic Church, after which he eventually obtained the blessing of the priest to become part of the Protestant chapel. For Albert Lujan, this was a much more radical experience of community and services

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35 Ferguson, p. 181.

36 While appearing in the third article of the Creed, and being part of the experience of the Holy Spirit’s life-imparting power and presence, and the experience of the life of the church, the concept in the Christian understanding fits also closely underneath the second article of the Creed on the Son of God, who “was made human; and was crucified also for us...; he suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again...; and he will come again with glory, to judge the living and the dead.” This section on atonement denotes the ontological ground for the experience forgiveness of sins, union with Christ, and participation in his life.

37 See the trope from the film *Shawshank Redemption*’s Andy Dufregne: “I had to come to prison to become a crook.” And see also the ongoing burden of a kind criminalization of folks who were once incarcerated, which even includes exhonorees: Peter Colby, “Presumed Innocent: Little Twone’s Burden,” *Boom California*, 14 October 2017, <https://boomcalifornia.com/2017/10/14/presumed-innocent/>.

that were life-giving, allowing prisoners to grow and experience the transformative power indicative of redeemed life on the inside.

### *Community*

In cases where a weak church exists in prison and gangs or other structures dominate, believers have to make decisions about which road they'll go down. Prison life is not easy on anyone. With often antagonizing guards, difficult cellmates, gang activity and often inconsistencies with chaplains and chapel life, in many cases church members were "the stabilizers" in womens' facilities, an especially important reality when violence was threatened against women.<sup>38</sup> And the church often provided the connections, often with the outside, often toward education, often with the arts (music), and with other people of hope.<sup>39</sup> They shared with one another, taking up offerings for those who didn't have their needs met from outside help or inside employment. This is entirely organized by the church on the inside, as is sometimes the payment down of some new Christians' debt owed from involvement with prison economics.

The church's communal life is not always smooth, although the incarcerated church leadership does a lot to keep things right, solving many problems informally, which is why the soundness of church leadership is so important. They organized care for the sick and dying in prison, in the hospice wards;<sup>40</sup> they served as peacemakers, in one case stopping a riot by putting their bodies in the midst of a tense moment in an open dorm.<sup>41</sup> This is due to the high levels of trust. Patreece stated, "Any person who I had a bond with was based on religion."<sup>42</sup>

### *The Body of Christ*

This bond shows itself in the unity of the indigenous, interracial, intergenerational, transformational, missionary body of Christ behind bars, which embodies a liquidity<sup>43</sup> and an openness to being structured in many ways,

38 Interview with Linda Barkman.

39 This blurs the lines between the "sincere" and "insincere" reasons in Harry R. Dammer, "The Reasons for Religious Involvement in the Correctional Environment," in Thomas P. O'Connor and Nathaniel J. Pallone, eds., *Religion, the Community, and the Rehabilitation of Criminal Offenders* (New York: Routledge, 2002, repr. 2011), pp. 38–52.

40 Interview with Kenneth Lucero, Los Angeles, 30 January 2016.

41 Interview with Sylvester Wright.

42 Interview with Patreece Johnson, New Jersey via Skype, 21 January 2016.

43 See Pete Ward, *Liquid Ecclesiology: The Gospel and The Church* (Leiden: Brill, 2017); John R. Franke, "Contextual Mission: Bearing Witness to the Ends of the Earth," in *Four Views on The Mission of the Church*, ed. Jason S. Sexton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), pp. 107–33.

often shaped by the chaplain or the other leaders and their ecclesial affinities. Sometimes the structures are so intense and contestable that they work like other gangs in their organizational structure and strictness.<sup>44</sup> The structures often display the various gifts, which “Preacher” Dixon noted will eventually manifest themselves in somewhat self-authenticating ways.<sup>45</sup> These gifts include pastors, teachers, peacemakers, helps, music director, praise dancers (for women),<sup>46</sup> elders, deacons, choir members—each of which has higher levels of responsibility and accountability. They had usually been in a facility longer, and could be expected to lead discipline efforts (e.g., in the chapel) and set the bar high even if others might misbehave.

Various forms of learning or discipleship occur in the prison, where the church is seen as a family, even during lockdown situations when the chaplain/priest is able to visit individual cells and living units, but so are other inmate leaders. Church involvement often precedes and provides the basis for other meaningful transformative involvement in the prison,<sup>47</sup> and with other programming efforts meant to benefit the good of prisoners. Christians often operate with an openness and transparency that grants them success and favor that few others experience within the prison setting.

These reasons highlight the important need for the non-incarcerated church to recognize that there’s an actual church inside the carceral setting, with leadership development under way even though the outside church may not be able to see exactly how it works, or may not believe it to be of the same quality of experience and that exists outside. Of course, this ought to be considered in light of Jesus’ explicit statement that he would be *in* the prison (Matt. 25:36: “I was in prison and you visited me.”) and St. Paul’s statement to not be ashamed of him, a prisoner (2 Tim. 1.8). Compared to what is often experienced in our churches, the incarcerated church with its vibrant dynamic life often functions in a much more healthy situation even whilst remaining semi-underground, or subversively resistant to other carceral structures in the prison.<sup>48</sup>

That said, the church inside exists within various degrees of health. Church leaders (whether locally designated or chaplain-appointed, the latter often breeding problems) sometimes try to run things like the ordinary operations

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44 Interview with Duane Meseah, Los Angeles, 7 February 2016.

45 Interview with Robert Dixon.

46 Interview with Patreese Johnson.

47 Interview with Sam Lewis, Los Angeles, 28 March 2016.

48 There are several ways that the church subverts the underground economy within the prison: along with their refusal to participate in the drug and sex trade, they are also generous without expecting return, and do not possess cell phones.

on the yard, which doesn't always go well.<sup>49</sup> Leaders had to be those of "impeccable walking standards," which would help bring about the witnessing, and strengthen their efforts.<sup>50</sup> All of these, of course, are institutionally-conditioned, for example, by guards, gangs, wardens, chaplains, and other factors. The institutions also conditioned various educational and denominational outlets, along with other religious and ideological differences and conflicts, which are not always bad things if they help facilitate further growth and development.

Beyond this, the church takes on a much more robust shape in the lower-level facilities, where it is more concretely manifested "because of the freedom inside of the prison itself... freely and easily gathering."<sup>51</sup> The prison church one might recognize is less likely to exist in strong ways in the higher-level facilities unless it becomes something fundamentally different than what the church is, especially committed to the principle of non-violence. Some other religious groups may function more actively in the higher level facilities (e.g., Prislam and other groups who embrace violence as part of their ordinary activity).<sup>52</sup> But these matters are all time-conditioned, circumstantially-prescribed, shaped by the local leadership, fashioned by the chaplains (sometimes either bad or good) in ways that cultivate both because of and *despite* the chaplain. And the prison ministries are also volunteer-driven, sometimes generating good results like helpful programs (e.g., Celebrate Recovery for drug and alcohol abusers), education (e.g., TUMI), relationships (e.g., dating relationships and marriage), diversity, and connections to work or housing situations upon release. Bad consequences of volunteer-conditioning can also result in conflict amongst groups, dissolution of positive developments, and complicating things negatively for a season. But it doesn't seem that these negative seasons last long as the church is being sanctified.

### *New Humanity*

The sanctification experience is part of the church's reality as the new humanity. This reality is immediately manifest in the church's constitution as interracial, which is fundamentally a radical thing in American prisons from the 1960s on. They operate and are constituted as this new humanity, giving rise

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49 Interview with Robert Dixon.

50 Interview with Sylvester Wright.

51 Interview with Duane Meseah.

52 Dammer, "The Reasons for Religious Involvement in the Correctional Environment," pp. 44–45. See also *Muslims in US Prison: People, Policy, Practice*, ed. Nawal H. Ammar (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2015), chs. 9–10 for an account of so-called, Prislam.



to new—on some accounts, “spontaneous”—governance structures and new operative relations with warden, guards, outside volunteers, as well as family on the outside. And participants in the outside don’t often know how to handle levels of raw transparency that emerge in place of earlier calculatedness. The non-incarcerated church also doesn’t much know how to relate to this, which is actually a far more ancient problem than commonly acknowledged.<sup>53</sup>

Some prisoners on the yard observe this interracial witness, and unity, and grant its status as a community and new way within the prison to be respected. And in spite of some “ministry” practitioners who intentionally developed splinter religious groups (as Protestantism tends to do) and didn’t wish to organize, the church inside is viewed as an equalizing community, egalitarian, accepting of all but leaving none as they came in. Their ecclesially-driven anthropological consciousness saw no one as above another, even confronting chaplains when necessary, many of whom are troubling figures.<sup>54</sup> In spite of momentary lapses from time to time, church leadership is often well-organized, caring in ways that were gentle, mutual, and respectfully understood, and even those in leadership who needed discipline.<sup>55</sup>

All of this, of course, highlights the reality of sanctification in the prison, or real growth in maturity, observable by all in the carceral context. In California, theological education is on the radar of the Superintendent of Education, which is somewhat unprecedented in our secular state, especially if the state helps pay for it. People observe the church in prison, noting recidivism rates, weighing economic and expenditure factors, considering new programming features, and how to assist prisoners in living whatever level of meaningful

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53 See Acts 10.45, and see the treatment of this first c. Jewish-Gentile conflict over circumcision by Willie James Jennings, “This is What Intimacy Sounds Like,” *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), pp. 109–114.

54 Sam Lewis recounted a situation where a chaplain was “doing wrong,” and the prison church leaders followed an ordered process for disciplining him, meanwhile holding church services on the yard. When nothing changed, keeping the guards and prison administration out of it, they contacted the denominational body of the chaplain, keeping it “at the chaplain and church level,” a chaplain ordaining body. Eventually, from Soledad prison the chaplain “was fired for conduct that was not becoming of a chaplain.” Interview with Sam Lewis, 20 January 2016.

55 In one case, a “knock-out artist” who had become a deacon was being tested by a young instigator. After being taunted repeatedly, “the deacon hit him one time, just smacked him unconscious. And, immediately you could tell that [pause]; it was like that’s not what I wanted to do. That’s not what I wanted to do. But it was done and then, so he lost his position as deacon. He was asked to step down.” Interview with Sam Lewis, 28 March 2016.

lives they can whilst serving within their capacities, while most also prepare for release.

This dynamic of sanctification is also ecumenical, and in its best moments acknowledges the Protestant/Catholic distinction as somewhat of a foreign imposition of the life of the church.<sup>56</sup> This dynamic ecclesial dismemberment fuels the ongoing mission of the church in the incarcerated setting. And yet, in a way, the ecclesiology being developed here is something unique, operative within a unique context that may again be described as a “present distress” (1 Cor. 7.26). Here the gifts emerge *as needed* and *supernaturally*, or “providentially” as fitting and eschatological as much as oriented toward sanctification and ultimate glorification of the individual and the whole. The result becomes a working family, or a coherent body, in their best shape. It is also a maimed body on every account, in solidarity with the head of the body, the crucified Christ, whose incarnate life brings theirs into the path toward being healed, located within the prison of all places as a place of redemption and reconciliation.

### *God the Father*

A fitting conclusion to this sketch of the prison church, understood in light of a reverse reading of the Creed, I conclude that here we begin to see the church freshly—the place where lives are redeveloped and reconstituted, and where leaders emerge. It is a family in the carceral setting, which may surely be different than what is ordinarily experienced in the majority of churches, with a more intense fellowship, family, “the brothers,” which I take as a unique thing: single-gendered churches. The brothers (and sisters) need leaders and mentors, which are sometimes found in chaplains, but more often found informally in the prison and for short seasons—the paternal figure doesn’t remain as such for very long, for contextualized reasons (avoiding the notion of a “shot caller,” as it is with the gangs), although none of this seems to be formally organized. It comes together informally, and yet with intentionality and almost subconsciously separates, in the best of cases. Yet the mentors *are* the pastoral figures.

Sometimes these are not elders in age; sometimes they are in fact younger men and women, and yet fulfill a deep need. Many incarcerated folks never

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56 See Interview with Frankie Guzman, Whittier, California, 29 January 2016, for a discussion of the dynamic differences between Protestant and Catholic chapels. See also interview with Albert Lujan who noted that “A great percentage of Catholics were being converted into Protestantism.” See also the discussion of the Catholic priest at Donovan State Prison who served for twenty-five years and stated plainly: “Most of you guys are going to end up in the Protestant services,” and even sent Albert there with his favor and blessing.

had a healthy father figure at home.<sup>57</sup> I take these also, remembering them as if there with them (Heb. 13.3), as being my own incarcerated brothers and sisters, who have a faith and a reconciled relationship to God as their Creator and Father, to whom they are being guided home, but also while journeying with the Incarnate God the incarcerated Christ, through the Spirit, down the road of redemption while growing as leaders for the church in prison, for other prison actors, and as manifestly real blessings to the whole world.

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57 When Albert Lujan was about 22 or 23 years old, one of his cellmates got out of prison and murdered his father while Albert was still in prison.