



The College at  
Southeastern

# AMBASSADORS IN EXILE

Theology & Transformation

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## Introducing the Third Issue of *Ambassadors In Exile* (AIE)

On December 15, 2021, the inaugural class of the North Carolina Field Minister Program (NCFMP) donned caps and gowns, walked the stage, and received degrees—a Bachelor of Arts in Pastoral Ministry. The graduation ceremony had originally been scheduled for May of 2021 but had to be postponed due to the pandemic. With all of the pandemic-related restrictions, graduates had wondered whether or not there would even be a graduation ceremony.

witnessed in the individuals. Dr. Akin claimed he had never been more honored to sign his name to any degrees. Mr. Ishee called the 2021 class members “beacons of hope” for NC prisons and society.

Then, the graduates responded to the call of their names by walking across the stage to shake the hand of Dr. Akin and receive that degree. Even through the masks, the smiles of many of the graduates were unmistakable. Those smiles held for the next several hours. Each graduate got



The ceremony and subsequent dinner with family offered graduates not only a time to celebrate their achievement, but also a time that will be cherished enduringly. The ceremony featured speeches by Joe Gibbs, NCFMP Director, Dr. Seth Bible, Southeastern President, Dr. Danny Akin, and NC DPS Commissioner of Prisons, Todd Ishee. Coach Gibbs communicated his respect for the academic success and commitment to service of the cap-and-gown clad. Dr. Bible reminisced about the start of the journey and the changes he

to invite two persons to the ceremony and post-graduation meal and family time. The family time gave graduates the opportunity to eat a meal with family and friends for the first time in many years, even decades. The time with family was even better than the degree.

The third issue of AIE carries the theme of “Theology & Transformation.” AIE continues to focus on providing insightful information and interesting personal accounts of life and ministry in the prison context. 

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# The *Imago Dei* in Prison: Overcoming Dehumanization with Theology

Timothy Johnson

A common adage warns about treating people in ways that dehumanize: “If you treat people like animals long enough, they will eventually act like animals.” Depriving a person or a people group of human qualities, dignity, or personality harms all involved and society. Society often views anyone in prison, or who has been in prison, as less than fully human, and often as a single entity—*prisoners* or *criminals*, or as animals. The court and prison systems deal with the incarcerated like they are handling a box in a warehouse or a faulty piece of machinery, assigning a number and mostly ignoring Inmate #03301982 unless an immediate problem must be addressed. Nearly every aspect of the environment of incarceration advances this dehumanization, from the dis-

dainful communication from authority figures to the strip searches to being housed on top of each other. Too many of us who live in prison contribute to this people-devaluing by treating our neighbors with disregard or disrespect. We—incarcerated individuals—have limited opportunity to change the way we are viewed and treated by society, but we can view and treat each other in ways that recognize the value of each person. A theological principle provides a foundation for humanizing each other: *imago Dei*—every person is made in the image of God.

Theology is not just a subject for clergy and seminary professors. The study of God and the Bible impacts everyday life in practical, meaningful ways. The *imago Dei* principle offers every

Christian a solid foundation from which to build upon in all areas concerning people. The biblical truth that every person is made in the image of God (*imago Dei*) is simple yet profound: “The most stunning biblical assertion respecting humanity is that God made human beings *in his image*. Of no other creature, not even of the angels, is such a statement found.”<sup>1</sup> What does it mean for a person to be made in the image of God? How does using the *imago*

*Dei* principle as foundational impact life and ministry, specifically in the prison environment? Human beings are made in the image of God, with that image expressed in (1) structural characteristics, (2) capacity for and engagement in relationships, and (3) functional responsibilities and roles. A composite view of the *imago Dei* that incorporates these structural, relational, and functional elements offers the most complete ex-



Barry Mintz

planation. This practical theological principle of viewing others as made in the image of God transforms how a person views and interacts with others.

## Structural Imaging

Exploring the composite view begins with the structural aspect, with form before function, because function derives from form. The structural view holds that “the image is identified as some definite characteristic or quality within the makeup of the human.”<sup>2</sup> The most common diagnostic variable has been reason, “humanity’s capacity for rational thought,” a view which explains how “humans image a rational and wise God in their capacity for

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rational and wise thought.”<sup>3</sup> However, trying to isolate a single human characteristic and link that to a sole attribute of God is misguided. Given the complexity of a human being, isolating a single quality is an impossible task. Although the *imago Dei* includes humanity’s characteristic for rational thought, the imaging extends beyond that sole aspect. The faculty of reason is a vital characteristic, but it is only a small slice of the whole. Instead of isolating a single characteristic, the aspects of rational thought, creative instinct, moral conviction, personal identification, self-consciousness, and eternal yearning must be considered comprehensively. God created a being that possesses a number of aspects that contribute to the bearing of his image. This intricacy itself serves as a structural characteristic of the *imago*. The structural aspect of the *imago Dei* is essential but merely the beginning of the composite view.

The structural aspect of the *imago Dei* principle offers guidance for thinking and talking about social justice and its pursuit. Recognizing that every person is made in the image of God—Black people, White people, Hispanics, Native Americans, and everyone else; conservatives, liberals, and libertarians—provides a foundation for engagement with anyone considered “other.” Beginning interpersonal activity with the understanding that all are image-bearers replaces barricades with bridges, erasing any and all lines of separation, uniting the divided. Viewing all as image-bearers generates a desire to listen and understand. Listening is the first step toward social justice and equality.

Society’s failure to listen has been on full display as protesters across the nation demonstrate their frustration. Martin Luther King Jr. described rioting as “the language of the unheard.” King was not encouraging people to riot if they felt unheard; he was encouraging people to listen to persons crying out for justice. Listening validates the oppressed as persons deserving justice, enables people to understand the causes of social justice, and empowers people to develop actionable solutions.

Every person in prison well understands the need to be heard, the desire for someone, anyone, to listen. Incarcerated persons may not have the power to institute justice and equality at the systemic or societal level, but we do have the capacity to pursue social justice and equality on a personal level. This pursuit begins with listening—listening in order to understand, listening in order to learn, listening in order to respond. Viewing others as made in the image of God generates a willingness to listen, even when listening is hard. Listening facilitates engagement—first, on a personal level, then on a broader level. When it comes to injustice, listening is the least that can be done, but listening must be done first. Listening serves a vital role not only in social justice but in

all areas of life. In light of the current tidal wave of activism that propels the cry for long overdue social justice and equality in America, we should strive to listen to each other, to seek to understand, in light of understanding that every person is made in the image of God.

Viewing others through the *imago Dei* lens has made me a better listener. I knew how to listen well and could be a caring, empathic listener when so compelled. However, my orientation to task over relationship, led me to perceive people as interruptions when previously focused on a task. Personal productivity superseded the other person’s needs or wants. By considering each person as made in the image of God, opportunities replaced interruptions. This willingness to listen to image bearers has formed an awareness of the needs of others and a desire to help when possible, even if only by listening. Thanks to this development, I have helped my neighbors overcome the temptation to relapse into drugs, intervened in situations heading for physical violence, counseled persons drawn toward angry and destructive behavior, and encouraged some who were sliding downward into depression. Each time I listen to a fellow image-bearer, I reflect the image of God.

### **Relational Imaging**

The relational view of the *imago Dei* assigns the image to humanity’s participation in relationships. This view asserts that “human persons are fundamentally relational beings—related to God, to other humans, and to creation—and it is this relationality that truly images a God who is himself a relational being.”<sup>4</sup> Humanity’s capacity for and experience of relationship is an essential component of mankind’s unique distinction as the *imago*. God is a relational being. He has eternally existed in the Trinity, as God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Human beings image God in the capacity for and involvement in relationships. Humanity experiences both vertical and horizontal relationships. The vertical relationships are with God, which is obviously upward, and with creation, which is downward. The horizontal relationships involve fellow humans. Relationships are an indispensable portion of the essence of life for every person. Humanity was created in relationship with God, bestowed relationship with creation, and gifted relationship with other humans. Psychological science reports “that people are social. They need to feel passion, to communicate, experience empathy, be intimate with friends, family and lovers, and be committed to others.”<sup>5</sup> The capacity for relationship and the participation in relationships together construct an essential facet of a human being. This relational dynamic sup-

*(Continued on page 4)*

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plies an indispensable element of the *imago Dei* composite view.

Relating to each other as made in the image of God can help us overcome the harmful effects of the prison environment. This prison environment exists as a domain of deprivation—a setting defined by the scarcity or absence of goods, resources, needs, or opportunities. Most who enter prison come from an environment which suffers from deprivation in one or more areas. However, the deprivation encountered in prison is even more pervasive. In addition to the deprivation of liberty, residing in prison exposes a person to deprivation of resources, goods, safety and security, autonomy, emotional attachments, heterosexual companionship, educational and vocational opportunities (and training), and incentives. Short-term exposure to a deficiency in one or more of these areas generates detrimental stress and fear. Long-term exposure to such conditions can produce post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Although deprivation of liberty is an intentional component of incarceration, deprivation of food, basic medical care, safety from severe physical harm, or an enriching relationship often define life in prison. We within this stark environment can minimize the effects of deprivation by living with compassion. Recognizing the *imago Dei* generates this compassion—a concern for the needs or sufferings of others. In order to overcome deprivation, compassion must direct each person’s thinking, communication, and behavior. Stirred by compassion, each person should consider others when making decisions, communicating, and acting.

A general guiding question for living with compassion is “What are the current and future effects of my choices, words, and actions on others?” Some specific examples for the prison setting: “Who is going hungry and needs this extra soup?” “With who can I share a cup of coffee?” “Is someone not getting to call their mother when I use the phone repeatedly for two hours?” “Am I disturbing someone’s sleep or peace when I yell across the dorm at 11pm?” These examples are just a start. Instead of trying to get the most for oneself, we should ask, “How can I make someone’s day better?” An African proverb directs, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” Most individuals in prison went fast—directly to prison. Obviously, going far did not happen. By living in light of the *imago Dei*, we can live with compassion and go far together.

Living with compassion guided by an *imago Dei* foundation has helped me manage my own PTSD and assist others in dealing with their trauma. In managing my trauma effects, viewing myself as made in the image of God gives me a core sense of value and worth. Even on the nights when the shadows of “why did I do that” and “what might have been” taunt me, I find comfort in

knowing the God who made me in his image loves me immeasurably in spite of my mistakes and the harm I caused. The compassion generated by viewing others as made in the image of God helps me extend that compassion, relieving much of the stress from being surrounded by many others, all the time, who are trapped in a prison of their own selfishness. I have helped others face and battle trauma by using the *imago Dei* principle to implant within them a sense of their value and worth.

### Functional Imaging

The functional aspect of the image completes the composite view. The functional view maintains that the *imago* stems from what a human *does* rather than what a human *is*: “this is the idea that the image is not something present in the makeup of humans, nor the experiencing of relationships with God or with fellow humans, but rather consists in something one does. It is a human function.”<sup>6</sup> After the creation of mankind in Genesis 1, humankind is immediately given a job to do, a role to play in the world: dominion over the rest of creation and the mandate to “be fruitful and multiply.” Beyond theology, analysis from psychological science reveals that for most people, meaning is “discovered by being oriented toward the future—toward a task, person, or goal... Though there is no cultural mandate to structure lives according to those themes, people do.”<sup>7</sup> God created human beings with the characteristics necessary to act as his representatives, to exercise dominion, and to be fruitful and multiply. God also infused them with the drive to fulfill that role. The functional dynamic builds on the structural and relational aspects of the image, completing the composite view of the *imago Dei*.

The original mandate to be fruitful and multiply still applies, but in primarily a spiritual connotation. Instead of multiplying by procreation, spiritual fruitfulness entails fostering spiritual birth and growth. In the final remarks of Jesus Christ—the flawless imager—he charged his followers, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). Understanding that people are made in the image of God and that the image influences who people are and what they do impacts discipleship. As a result of sin, “God’s image in us is partly distorted...sin distorts our moral judgment, clouds our thinking, and hinders our fellowship with others.”<sup>8</sup> Discipleship spreads the gospel and propels image restoration, by teaching “the basics of Christian life, disciplines like Bible reading, prayer, Scripture memory, meditation, sharing one’s faith, or showing the love of Christ to others.”<sup>9</sup> Discipleship entails growing in and training others to grow in godliness, growing in reflecting Christ. This reflecting of Christ—the ultimate imager—is synonymous with reflecting the image of God, which culminates in loving him and others. By being fruitful and multiplying spiritually through discipleship, believers in prison trans-

form the prison environment.

When the COVID shutdown ceased all religious services in prison, followers of Christ joined together to form a church in the dorm. We hold a Sunday service and take turns preaching, with twenty-plus attending each week. Each Wednesday evening, I teach a Bible study for about a dozen. We started with several months of studying the spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible study, praise, service, stewardship, etc. Now, we are doing a study titled “Tapestry of the New Testament,” in which we are examining the context of the New Testament chronologically, culturally, and historically. In preaching, teaching, and discipling others, the *imago Dei* principle has served as a core theological principle. Church members who operate through this principle have a better understanding of the Bible and how to live according to the example of Christ. Viewing others as made in the image of God leads directly to evangelism and service, significantly impacting the prison environment.

### Composite Imaging

Explaining the image of God must account for the form and function, the *is* and the *does*, of a human being. The composite view best explains the *imago Dei* principle—what it means for a person to bear the image of God—because this view incorporates the structural, relational, and functional aspects. The characteristics, capacities, and activities of a human are inseparable, as are the attributes of God. A sufficient understanding of the image is necessary because that theological conception impacts life and ministry.

God made human beings in his image to bring him honor and glory. A human honors and glorifies God by fulfilling “The Great Commandment” of loving God and loving others. The ability to love God and others was severely diminished at the fall because the image was distorted. The person and life of Jesus Christ—the perfect imager—demonstrate what the image undistorted by sin is like. Jesus was perfect in all characteristics and capacities, experienced continual and perfect relationship with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, and exercised dominion over the natural world. The unblemished example of Jesus as the *imago*, “shows humankind as God had intended and called humans to be.”<sup>10</sup> Salvation—the redemption provided by Christ, the true image and perfect sacrifice—initiates the restoration of the image. The closer a person walks with Christ, the more the image of God is witnessed. That living in Christ enables an imager to love God and others. This culmination impacts everything affected by sin—the core characteristics, vertical and horizontal relationships, and functional fulfillment.

For a Christian each role and every task offers an opportunity

to bring glory to God by loving him and others. Just as treating people as animals harms them, treating people as made in the image of God heals them. The whole-person composite perspective of the *imago Dei* transforms how life is lived, including every interaction. Through the *imago Dei* lens, believers treat all people according to the great worth bestowed by being created in the image of God. Loving God and others propagates the understanding that shared worth and equal value extends to all genders, races, nationalities, religions, and creeds—people in and out of prison. Viewing others as image-bearers counters the ways in which the prison environment makes them feel less than. In this, the *imago Dei* concept overcomes the myriad assaults that would dehumanize.

God made humanity in his image. For every Christian everywhere, viewing every person as made in the image of God provides the foundation for all activities, interactions, and subjects concerning people. When discussing social justice, begin with the understanding that every person is made in the image of God. Debating an issue in ethics, start with the *imago Dei*. The *imago Dei* principle provides believers with an essential foundation from which to approach the vital venture of discipleship. Interacting with another person: *imago Dei*. This principle assigns significant and equal value to every person. A composite view of the image significantly impacts life and ministry, especially in the prison environment. The *imago Dei* principle helps incarcerated believers combat the dehumanization prevalent within prisons. 

### Endnotes

- <sup>11</sup> Elwell, Walter A. ed. 1988. *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 2. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, s.v. “Doctrine of Man.”
- <sup>2</sup> Erickson, Millard J. 2013. *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 460.
- <sup>3</sup> Cortez, Marc. 2010. *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York: T&T Clark, 18.
- <sup>4</sup> Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 24.
- <sup>5</sup> Worthington, Everett L. 2010. *Coming to Peace with Psychology: What Christians Can Learn from Psychological Science*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 190.
- <sup>6</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 465-466.
- <sup>7</sup> Worthington, *Coming to Peace with Psychology*, 193, 194.
- <sup>8</sup> Grudem, Wayne A. 2005. *Christian Beliefs: Twenty Basics Every Christian Should Know*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 60.
- <sup>9</sup> Gallaty, Robby. 2013. *Growing Up: How to be a Disciple Who Makes Disciples*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 25.
- <sup>10</sup> Thiselton, Anthony C. 2015. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 137.

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# Different and Beautiful: Understanding and Embracing Differences

Lucas Rash

American history is littered with the pain and heartache caused by differences of race: human beings shipped across the Atlantic Ocean as if nothing more than a packaged good, people sold and owned like a horse or a plow, young men castrated and lynched for looking at a woman of another skin color, children killed in a church bombing. Even as students across the country declared the “Pledge of Allegiance,” or sang the national anthem, in celebration of the ideas of liberty and justice for all, *all* Americans clearly did not have the same liberty or justice. The inconsistency between principles and practice exemplifies an immeasurable problem in the way certain American people are regarded and how people with differences understand each other.

Many conversations and movements have sought to find a solution to the crippling problem of the improper view of racial differences that is suffocating our nation. Yet, the injustices and the separation continue. If left unaddressed, the effects of this tragedy will continue to plague the generations to come in a never ending cycle of oppression and hate. Tearing down the walls of separation, the divisions due to skin color or culture, will require a monumental movement involving many people across the country to initiate the process, to persevere, to bring about meaningful change. This process begins by recognizing that all human beings are united by their very makeup, a formation that gives equal worth to all. Also, evils exist in mankind and are the root of some unthinkable deeds done by people against others. This evil can be defined as sin, and it affects every person on the planet. The person and teachings of Christ offer grounds for and guidance to accepting one another and moving to a position of love for each other. Guided by the example and teaching of Christ, people can demolish biases and the ensuing walls of prejudice, converse with openness by seeking to understand each other, embrace the differences, view each other as of equal value and deserving of respect and love, and actively seek to build relationships with each other.

## Biblical Mandate for Love

Deep down inside the very soul of man exists an intense desire to be regarded as valuable and worthy by others. Understanding the origin of this need requires examining the creation of

humans and the fall. In Genesis 1:26-27, God forms humans in the “image” and “likeness” of God. Then, God gives humans the responsibility to exercise “dominion” over all of creation. Two important points come to light in these verses: First, every person—regardless of any racial differences—is made in the image of God. Mankind’s unique status as imager of God demonstrates the value that God bestows to every person. Second, the responsibility to exercise dominion has a very obvious and meaningful limitation: humans do not have a dominion-type authority over other humans, because all are equal. In Leviticus 19:18, God instructs his people to “love your neighbor as yourself.” With the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus teaches that this neighbor-love extends to all, crossing lines of race, creed, and community. In God’s original design, mankind was to work, respect, love, and flourish together, but sin entered the picture and veered everything off course.

Sin is the poison at work within the hearts of mankind. Sin creates prejudices. Sin destroys relationships. Sin works to disrupt relational harmony. Sin builds up the walls of separation. Thankfully, Christ came. He gave himself as a ransom for sin, so that mankind could be freed from the snares of sin. Through Christ, human beings can experience

restored relationship with him and with each other. Once free of sin’s grasp, human beings can view the differences, not as the bricks of a wall of separation, but as beautiful aspects of being uniquely created in the image of God.

## Breaking Down Walls

Breaking down any wall requires action—the action of dismantling it brick-by-brick. The process to dismantle the walls of racial and cultural divisions begins with open, honest conversations. Most people converse with people from different races, but must engage in discussions specifically about the racial differences. The conversations must move from general to meaningful. The goal in this communication is to reveal and then expel any prejudices and biases. This discovery process allows for people to see other people as both same and different—same in shared humanity, different in ways that are special and unique.

Malcom X, a forerunner in the fight for equality, understood the value of being able to speak freely. To paraphrase something

**Breaking  
down  
any wall  
requires  
action**

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he once said when addressing this topic, “Black men and white men must be able to come together and have intelligent conversations without worrying about offending the other, so that they can work toward the goal of addressing and solving problems that have been swept under the rug.” An African-American fellow prisoner mirrors the thoughts of Malcolm X, concluding that “talking to one another in order to really understand each other is important, as well as talking to pinpoint offensive subjects.” Only through the willingness to talk to each other with audacious self-disclosure of thoughts and feelings will change happen. These personal conversations facilitate the tearing down of the separating walls and the subsequent building of relationships through discovering and appreciating each other’s true self.

However, the willingness to have these conversations offers only a starting point. Conversation partners must seek to gain a better understanding of each other and themselves. Knowing how someone grew up, their developmental and educational influences, and the experiences that shaped them creates relational ties. Moreover, sharing these influences and experiences helps each party correct misconceptions and false or negative stereotypes. These conversations may not always be easy; in fact, some of the things will be difficult to hear and absorb, but real and meaningful change requires growing pains.

For example, a fellow incarcerated individual, who was taught some mistruths during his youth, disclosed that there were some difficult moments in overcoming this faulty thinking: He was brought up in a house where he was instructed that white people were not to be trusted and lived much of his life with that mindset. By courageously reaching out to have personal conversations with those outside his race in order to challenge this belief, he removed the shroud of the misconceptions, discarded the faulty thinking, dismantled the walls of racial prejudice, and built many meaningful relationships with people of other races and cultures. His demolition and rebuilding journey displayed an understanding of the need to challenge preconceptions, relearn foundational information, and rebuild on the new foundation. This person stands not alone, but with much company in the group taught false stereotypes or misconceptions based on racial and cultural differences. He exemplifies the way to progress from being separated by the walls formed from this faulty thinking to demolition to unity building by engaging in conversations defined by self-disclosure, setting aside any assumed ideas or preconceptions, and capitalizing on the opportunity to truly know each other.

The differences between races, cultures, and individuals can be a cause for a passionate celebration of diversity rather than a bad thing. Embracing the differences creates genuine acceptance and love for each other. Camille T. Dungy, notable black poet and

essayist, captures this idea beautifully: “when we recognize difference without bias, we begin to see the potential of the person in front of us.”<sup>5</sup> This ability to see without bias should be a primary goal; every person should seek to see the value of each other, not apart from one’s race, but through it.

A person’s race should not be overlooked, but appreciated, because race forms part of their makeup and identity. Doing this clarifies the view of the person as made in the image of the Creator. In contrast, the various stereotypes attached to race must be identified, examined, and discarded. This process further constructs the view of a person worthy of value and respect. A Native American voices this sentiment powerfully: “despite any failures we may have, or differences in the color of one’s skin, I owe respect to the next man because we are all made in the image of God.” Being able to recognize the value that all people inherently share presents the ultimate goal, unveiling the capacity to truly see someone’s potential and appreciate them lovingly.

### **Making a Choice**

The complex and cumulative effects of racism have stained and torn the very fabric on which this country rests. The stains and rips continue to torment many Americans, young and old alike. These stains cannot be simply washed clean, but a process of cleansing and mending can be accomplished through a united effort to change the status quo, an effort to seek equality and justice for all. This effort cannot be accomplished by one person or even a segment of society, but if each person shares a portion of the burden, the weight will be light. Each person must decide to take the first step by examining their preconceptions to discover the presence of any mistruths or prejudices based on race or culture. Then, the next step involves making the choice to depart from that faulty thinking, tear down the walls of separation, and build a foundation of equality, relationship, community, and celebration of diversity. Courageously enter into the difficult conversations with persons of different races and cultures, learn to appreciate the differences, and build relationships.

God created all people in his image to live and work together. Together, people can overcome the rift, the great divide that sin has caused. The prophet Isaiah foretells a day when all people will come together as one: “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,” and what a glorious day this will be—a day with no more separation, no more hate, only love and fellowship. 

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Dungy, T. Camille. 2018. “Poetic Justice” (written by Airica Parker) *The Sun*. (June 2018), 4-12.

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# The Transformative Power of Theology

Kelvin Smith

Away with theology and all its clever distinctions and wearisome debates. What we need is not more theology but simple faith, not more elegant arguments but transformed hearts, unadorned commitment to Christ, unqualified acceptance of what the Bible teaches, and uncompromising trust in the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

—Daniel L. Migliore

Is Christian theology in opposition to simple faith, transformed hearts, unadorned commitment to Christ, unqualified acceptance of biblical truth, and uncompromising trust in the Holy Spirit? Perhaps a critical view of theology derives from a misunderstanding of the true nature and intended meaning and purpose of theology. For some people, the term theology depicts the mental image of professional theologians navigating massive volumes of books containing complex concepts, sophisticated arguments, and specialized terminology, a task too daunting for the average Christian. However, at its most basic meaning, theology refers to discourse (*logos*) about God (*theos*). Bruce Riley Ashford and Keith Whitfield define theology as “the practice of sustained and disciplined reflection on the narrative and truths of Scripture for knowledge of and love for God.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, theology consists of a disciplined study of and meditation on Scripture for the purpose of knowing and loving God. As believers faithfully study and meditate on the Scriptures, we gain a deeper knowledge of who God is and develop a more intimate love for God. The ultimate goal of loving God not only drives theology, but this desire to love God is also the very heart of Christian theology. Contrary to the sentiments of some Christians, theology and transformation are intimately connected. Christian theology plays an essential role in life-long transformation because it imparts a deeper knowledge of God and produces a more intimate love for God in the believer, both of which are *means* to the *end* of a transformed life.

Transformation, a marked change for the better, initially occurs at the reception of God’s grace in Christ. The theological term for this initial change is *regeneration*. Louis Berkhof defines regeneration in the strictest sense as an act of God wherein God implants the principle of the new life in man.<sup>3</sup> The new life that Berkof mentions is the fulfillment of the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36-37. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel

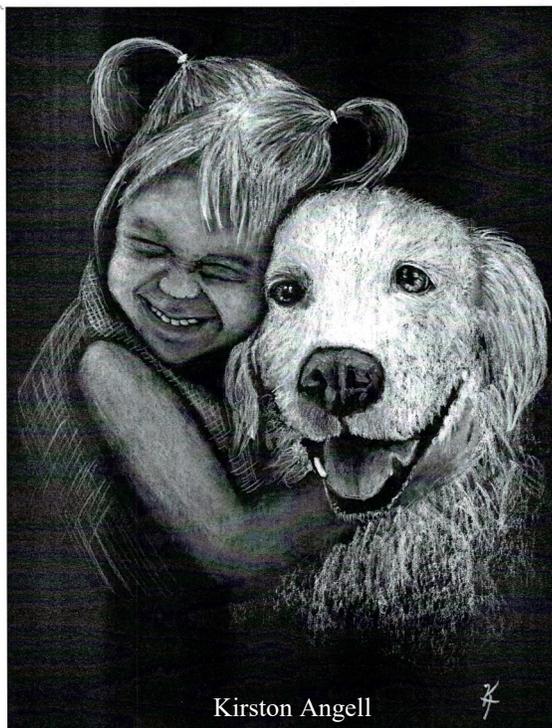
utilize rich imagery to depict the transformative work of the Lord. Whereas Jeremiah employs the imagery of the law being written upon the heart, Ezekiel employs the imagery of cleansing water, the new heart, and the new spirit. Hebrews 8 explicitly identifies

Jesus as the fulfillment of the new covenant. Just as Ezekiel prophesies, the work of Jesus Christ transforms individuals by creating in us a new heart and a new spirit. God’s creative work of regeneration produces an internal, radical change in all believers that begins at the reception of God’s grace in Christ and endures as a life-long experience. In Romans 8:2, the Apostle Paul avows that the indwelling Holy Spirit liberates Christians “from the law of sin and death.” Then in Colossians 3:1-11, Paul asserts that Christians who are raised to a new life in Christ live sanctified lives. Paul points to the established principle that a transformed life necessarily follows the new creation because God’s work of regeneration directs the Christian’s life.

God began his creative work of regeneration in me approximately seventeen years ago, and most of those seventeen

years have been spent in prison. The moment that God implanted a new heart and a new spirit within me, my life took a marked change for the better. I immediately recognized an internal change, a transformation that continues to manifest evidence of a new life. Where hate once resided, love now reigns. Where selfishness once existed, selflessness now rules. Where ungodly desires once dominated, godly passions now dictate my actions. Love, selflessness, and godly passions fuel my ministry as a Field Minister and Graduate Assistant here at Nash Correctional. Whether it is ministering the Word of God through preaching and teaching or mentoring a new Christian or tutoring a student in the Field Minister Program or counseling a fellow-incarcerated person, I act out of love and selflessness because God propels me to do so. To this day, I stand amazed at the transformation that God is working in me.

Daniel Migliore “describe[s] the work of theology as a continuing search for the fullness of the truth of God made known in



Kirston Angell

Jesus Christ.”<sup>4</sup> Migliore’s assertion both dispels the misconception that theology is “mere repetition of traditional doctrines” and highlights the interrogative nature of theology.<sup>5</sup> Simply put, Christian theology seeks answers to questions about God and how He relates to all of creation. Rampant injustice, unexpected sickness, and the death of a loved one provoke Christians to pursue understanding of their circumstances in relation to God. As questions arise, Christians wrestle with Scripture to make sense of the circumstances of life. Theology is the searching of and reflection upon the Scriptures in order to answer these and other complex questions about life. The circumstances of my own life serve as an impetus to study and meditate on the Scriptures. Attempting to further understand my new identity in Christ, how to relate to God the Father, to God the Son, to God the Holy Spirit, and to other Christians spurs me to daily search and meditate on the Scriptures. The more that I search the Scriptures, the more the Holy Spirit renews my mind according to God’s Word (Rom. 12:2). The more that the Holy Spirit renews my mind according to God’s Word, the further God transforms me into the image of Christ, a process known as progressive sanctification.

Ashford and Whitfield insist that “God’s self-revelation... provides the foundation, the trajectory, and the parameters for approaching the task of theology.”<sup>6</sup> Sin distorts humanity’s perception of who God is by presenting God as a harsh, unjust, and mysterious being that selfishly manipulates human beings into conforming to his will. Sin depicts God chopping at the bits to decimate anyone who rebels against his will. However, the Scriptures (and my experience) teach me that sin’s depiction of God is totally wrong. I know that my loving God forgives; He is merciful and is full of grace. I am a living and thriving testimony of God’s forgiveness, mercy, and grace. For a number of years, I lived contrary to God’s will as a staunch enemy of God. As I learn from the Scriptures more about who God is, what He requires, and what He is due, my heart fills with love for God, which in turn fuels my transformation. Although a complete understanding of who God is lies beyond humanity’s grasp, God desires for all human beings to know Him. This purpose is evident as God deliberately reveals Himself in the pages of the Scriptures. Since God reveals himself in the Word of God, the authoritative Scriptures ground, direct, and constrain Christian theology. Christian theology aims to know God as He is revealed in the Scriptures, a knowledge that not only causes the Christian to appreciate who God is, but also spurs love for God. Practicing theology ultimately leads to a total-life transformation by reorganizing one’s priorities and reorienting one’s life towards God’s perfect will.

The Scriptures disclose how God relates to humanity in general and Christians in particular. As Christians consider the overarching narrative of Scripture, the truth that the story ultimately revolves around the redemption of humanity becomes evident. Although God’s plan of redemption includes the redeeming of all of creation from the distorting clutches of sin, humanity enjoys a noticeable place in the story. Theology asks hard questions about

humanity’s place in God’s plan of redemption. Upon reflection of the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit illuminates Christians of God’s plan and points to the gospel and the implications that follow for the redemption of mankind. The prophets prophesy of God the Father sending His Son to die the death that all of humanity rightly deserves. The Scriptures recount the birth of Jesus, the perfect life of Jesus, the agonizing death of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, and the ascension of Jesus to the right hand of the Father. Christians practice theology while reflecting on and studying God’s plan of redemption as revealed in the Scriptures, a task that floods our hearts with love for God.

Christian theology is absolutely essential to transformation. Through the practice of theology, Christians gain a deeper knowledge of who God is and develop a more intimate love for God. Although God’s work of transformation in my life began at the reception of God’s grace in Christ, theology has been an indispensable factor in the furthering of my transformation. The more I study and meditate on God’s Word, the better my understanding of who God is and how He works, the stronger my faith grows, and the clearer I see his plan for my life. The practice of theology causes me to behold and marvel at the wonders of God. As I meditate on God, my heart is filled with an overwhelming love for God. Theology also continues to inform, shape, and fuel my ministry as a Field Minister. Without the transformation produced through theology, I would not be able to effectively serve the men within the prison context as a Field Minister. Contrary to the belief of some Christians, theology exists to be embraced, not feared. Christian theology demands faithful and diligent study of the Scriptures and reliance on the Holy Spirit to illuminate Scripture. From the youngest child, who reads and meditates on “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life,” to the professional theologian, who has devoted his life to wrestling with complex doctrines such as Christology, all Christians who reflect on and ask questions of the Scriptures practice theology. Theology is the *means* to the *end* of a transformed life. Instead of disregarding or discarding theology, all Christians need to develop and cultivate a disciplined practice of theology. What we need is more Christians practicing theology so that faith is strengthened, hearts are transformed, commitments to Christ are renewed, biblical truth is affirmed, and trust in the Holy Spirit is fortified. 

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Migliore, Daniel L. 2014. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology, Third Ed.* Vol. Third edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 18.
- <sup>2</sup> Akin, Daniel L. 2014. *A Theology for the Church.* Nashville: B&H Academic, 6.
- <sup>3</sup> Berkhof, Louis. 2017. *Systematic Theology.* Louisville, Kentucky: GLH Publishing, 396-97.
- <sup>4</sup> Migliore, “*Faith Seeking Understanding.*” 15.
- <sup>5</sup> Migliore, “*Faith Seeking Understanding.*” 15.
- <sup>6</sup> Akin, *A Theology for the Church,* 4.

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# What Comes Next: Field Ministers Set to Deploy

Timothy Johnson

For the past four years, participants in the North Carolina Field Minister Program (NCFMP) have repeatedly asked, and been asked, “What comes next?” With graduation set for December 15 of this year (2021), “next” waits just around the corner. Some of the major post-graduation questions were: Where will Field Ministers (FMs) be sent? What will FMs do? Will the respective prison administrations yield space for FMs to operate effectively? How will the population receive FMs? With post-graduation quickly approaching, with FMs preparing to arrive at their mission field, answers to the key questions are arriving.

Deployment sites and teams for the first wave of FMs were announced in the spring (2021): Foothills, Granville (formerly Polk), Nash, Piedmont, and Warren correctional institutions. During the past few months, each team has met regularly to prepare as a unified team. Each team spent the first week of October doing a “Quick-Dip” visit to their pending deployment site, which gave them an opportunity to meet administrators and some of their soon-to-be incarcerated neighbors, to ask questions, evaluate needs, and discuss ideas for serving at the site. A general consensus surfaces following the stopovers: FMs are eager to get to their field, and the people at the sites eagerly await their arrival.

Kirston Angell chose Foothills, because he feels he can relate to the young guys and their struggles from his own time there: “I was housed there from 2007-2010. Locked up at 16, I can identify and empathize with them.” Arriving at the site, he noted, “We were thanked by so many staff members for our willingness to go through such a rigorous education and being willing to sacrifice so many of our privileges in order to come serve our fellow incarcerated brethren in the facility.” Angell continued, “The most mind blowing thing was the openness of staff to listen to our ideas and seeing that so many of them had actually been thinking and planning exactly how they would like to use us in counseling and ministry, including starting and leading bible studies, group sessions, art classes, a Men’s Club, etc.” Their time and energy will be in high demand.

The Foothills FMs received a somewhat different reception from the population. Before entering the housing block, they heard “guys in the cell block yelling, ‘Real police in tha’ block’ and ‘snitches in the block.’” A complete change happened “when we went into the block and guys got to know us and listen to our goals and purpose. We quickly formed friendships and relationships within the block. By the time we left four days later, guys were shooting us notes of encouragement, offering their thanks, and said they are looking forward to us coming back.” Perceptions changed quickly and totally.

Angell was particularly inspired by specific encouragement: “When multiple, not just one, respected gang members send you off with comments like, ‘Angell, much love and mad respect from

the homies. We want to say thank you for what ya’ll are trying to do here and know that God’s going to bless you. Ya’ll are straight. If you ever need anything, let us know.” Because of such responses, Angell and his team are eager to return to Foothills: “In all honesty, none of my team wanted to leave. We can’t wait to get back.” The Foothills team is ready, eager, and willing.

Jesse Bracey chose Granville, because his “heart’s desire” is to “pay it forward.” He wants “to help younger men in preparing not only to serve time, but also living productive lives, in general.” He said, the young men of Granville “showed respect, love, and courtesy to us each day. By the time we left, they were asking us to come visit them each day and ready for us to come back.” The Granville team was energized by being wanted and needed.

A similarly enthusiastic reception was given by the administration. Bracey said, the Granville “people really want us to be there and have made accommodations for us.” His most memorable moment was visiting the H-CON unit and speaking with the men there. The main concern for these FMs, and shared by other teams, is whether or not they will continuously and permanently receive the necessary support from the essential entities, the partners of the program: Southeastern, Game Plan for Life, and Department of Public Safety.

A pre-Quick-Dip virtual meeting left the Piedmont team a little concerned. When they asked, “What are your expectations for us?” they were told, “Stay infraction free.” FMs have been trained to serve, to make a difference in their world, to do much more than just avoid infractions. The initial concern for potential opportunity vanished during their visit to Piedmont.

Jamarr Springs was impressed by the Piedmont team’s warm welcome: “The administrators rolled out the red carpet for us. We met every facility head. Everyone received us well.” His most memorable moment came from an interaction with one of the captains, who spoke with genuine passion of trying to help people. The captain spoke of working with the FMs: “Together, we’re going to save some.” This commitment fueled the expectation of Springs and his team.

At Piedmont, FMs will work in the infirmary, speak to guys during orientation/intake, teach Thinking for a Change and a fatherhood class, do rounds in restrictive housing, do peer-supervisor suicide watch, and work with the general population in a variety of ways. Springs was encouraged by the reception from the population, commenting, “The population showered us with love, and said they can’t wait until we get back...and did not want us to leave.” Springs and the other FMs “look forward to deploying in January. It will be an adventure for sure.” They are eager for the opportunity and embrace the adventure.

The Warren team did not have a virtual meeting, so they had all questions and no answers before the visit. The foremost ques-

tion related to their future roles as intended by the prison’s decision-makers. Warren team member Toney King experienced two primary reactions from administration and staff upon arrival: enthusiasm and curiosity. From people with knowledge of the program, the FMs received an earnest welcome. When other individuals met the team and learned about their training and mission, total support replaced curiosity.

The incarcerated population offered a “very positive” reception, noted King. From the questions from and conversations with the men at Warren, he learned, “there are men there who are willing to become a part of a new movement in prison reform, which may change their lives, as well as their families and their communities.” The willingness of the guys on “the yard” creates “possibilities” for FMs to help the men extract their “amazing” potential and bring to fruition their hopes. When the team prepared to leave, the entire block shared their appreciation and expectation for their return.

Graduate Assistants (GAs) will remain at Nash to serve the program and the institution. GAs have a corporate mission, with a variety of individual roles and responsibilities. The corporate mission involves two primary roles: facilitating student academic success and preparing Field Ministers (FMs) to serve in the ministry context of prison, and beyond, with overlap between the two areas. Individual roles include tutoring, tutor-training, co-teaching, mentoring, counseling, program assessment, student academic success facilitation, organizing and leading chapel services, technology assistance, service leadership, and whatever else needs to be done. In order to effectively fulfill these sundry roles, GAs will receive additional education and training.

Although program graduates receive a bachelor’s degree, the NCFMP does not primarily aim to give degrees. The chief goal of the four years of schooling is to train FMs to serve in the field. For the first time, that goal is about to be realized. The FM teams heading to Foothills, Granville, Piedmont, and Warren eagerly await the opportunity to use what they have learned, to share themselves and their hearts with their soon-to-be incarcerated neighbors. Blazing a trail often presents a formidable challenge. The FMs are ready for the adventure. 



Grandville



Foothills



Piedmont

Deployment Sites	Granville	Foothills	Nash	Piedmont	Warren
Deployment Teams	Jesse Bracey Devon Carter Larry Doyle	Kirston Angell Lucas Rash Kyle Triplett Charles Young	Dustin Green Christopher Jacobs Timothy Johnson Barry Mintz Timothy Russell Kelvin Smith Jeffery Garner	Loren Hammonds Jonathan Ramirez Uri Small Jamarr Springs Fred Washington	Charles Ball Steven Barbour Aaron Estes Stephon Goode Toney King



Dr. Danny Akin



Joe Gibbs

# The College at Southeastern ~ Class of 2021 ~



Dr. Seth Bible



Renaldo Wynn



Kirston Angell



Charles Ball



Steven Barbour



Jesse Bracey



Devon Carter



Larry Doyle



Jeffrey Garner



Stephon Goode



Dustin Green



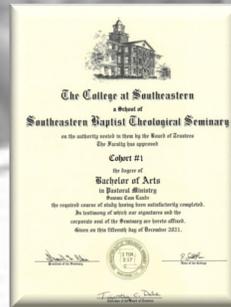
Loren Hammonds



Aaron Estes



Cristopher Jacobs



Timothy Johnson



Toney King



Barry Mintz



Jonathan Ramirez



Lucas Rash



Timothy Russell



Uri Small



Kelvin Smith



Jamarr Springs



Kyle Triplett



Fred Washington



Charles Young

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# Already Justified and Being Sanctified: True Joy and the Abundant Life

Kirston Angell

Have you witnessed a believer continually failing to demonstrate love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? Instead of bearing the fruit of the Spirit, this believer wallows in guilt, sin, shame, bitterness, and envy, of the joy of other believers, while professing forgiveness in Christ and the resulting gift of eternal life. In other words, this believer lives in a perpetual state of suffering. However, no one enjoys suffering, and the natural inclination to avoid suffering causes people to seek ways to come from under the bondage of suffering. Sometimes a believer thinks that doing more “churchy” stuff like giving to the poor or leading Bible studies or discipleship groups will make them feel better and cover up their sin, shame, and unrighteousness before God. Other Christians fall into the trap of legalism by trying to mitigate sin through performance, but when they fail miserably, they find themselves plunging deeper into the same pit of shame, guilt, and misery from which they were attempting to climb. Many of us Christians are or have been these types of believers, but the Christian life offers so much more: the abundant life, a life full of joy.

How does a believer get that more, that abundant, joy-filled life? How does a believer live with the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control? A good starting point is a correct understanding of justification and sanctification. By understanding the one-time act of justification and the lifelong process of sanctification, a believer begins to think differently, live differently, and interact differently with others. A right understanding of justification and sanctification combats legalistic thinking, produces a life full of God’s grace, and grows the fruit of the Spirit into all interpersonal interaction.

The apostle Paul asserts that a believer has peace with God because of justification by faith in Christ.<sup>1</sup> Norman Geisler explains that “*justification* is the act of God by which we who are unrighteous in ourselves are nevertheless *declared* righteous before God. It is a judicial (legal) act of *pronouncing* one to be right in God’s sight.”<sup>2</sup> A believer is justified by employing faith in Christ’s atoning death on the cross, not because of any personal merit. When someone places faith in Christ, God immediately and judi-

cially declares that person righteous by transferring the perfect sinless record of Jesus to that person’s account. Because of the atoning work of Christ, God forgives all of the believer’s past, present, and future sins.

Sanctification is the lifelong process where God enables and empowers a believer to grow steadily in moral righteousness and holiness before him by molding them into the image of Christ. Geisler explains, “sanctification is the process by which God gets sin out of us (actually).”<sup>3</sup> Whereas a believer cannot become more justified, they may become more sanctified as they “continue in grace-motivated obedience” to God.<sup>4</sup> C. J. Mahaney explains,

“Through the work of His Spirit, through the power of his Word and involvement with the local church, God peels away our desires for sin, renews our minds, and changes our lives.”<sup>5</sup>

In order for a believer to participate in the sanctification process, they must reckon that they are dead to sin through Christ and submit themselves to God by being obedient to his commands.<sup>6</sup>

The problem is that when some believers sin, they feel shame, guilt, or condemnation. At this point, these believers have let *feelings* become the basis for truth rather than God’s promises in

His Word. Instead of trusting that, “If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness,” a believer may strive to make themselves feel better by doing something good for someone else or abstaining from a certain thing in order to appease God’s wrath for the initial failure.<sup>7</sup> When a believer reaches this point, it is no longer about God, it is about making themselves feel better. The solution to the problem is submitting subjective, ever-fluctuating feelings to the objective, fixed promises of God’s Word.

A thorough understanding of justification and sanctification helps a believer resist legalistic thought. By understanding that being declared righteous comes *only* from Christ, a believer can find rest from the toils of perfectionism and legalism. In Christ, “I must do this” or “I must not do that” evaporates, for as Paul declares, “if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.”<sup>8</sup> Justification gives a believer peace of mind and rest in the completed work of Christ. At a foundational level, to be a

**Since sanctification is an ongoing process, a believer must remain connected to Christ**

Christian means that a believer has traded in the “polluted garments” of self-righteousness for the perfect robes of Christ’s righteousness.<sup>9</sup> Jesus desires for every believer to know the freedom and firmness of forgiveness, the security of their place in Jesus’ hand.<sup>10</sup>

What great joy I discover in knowing that no actions, sins, thoughts, words, or deeds can separate me from Christ. I rejoice in the declaration of Paul: “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels or rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”<sup>11</sup> Life inevitably brings struggle, but I and every believer can rejoice in the promise of Christ’s return to vanquish all affliction and wipe away every tear.<sup>12</sup>

Since sanctification is an ongoing process, a believer must remain connected to Christ: “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”<sup>13</sup> Consistently demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit requires constant connection to Christ through prayer, study of His Word, fellowship with the body of Christ, and communion with the Spirit. Christ did not come to condemn the world; therefore, believers should not condemn themselves or each other.<sup>14</sup> All believers continue to struggle with sin daily, thus all believers should evaluate others in light of this reality. Sanctification is a miracle, performed only by Spirit, but not an overnight miracle. Sanctification takes time and effort.

Additionally, a believer must avoid the mistake of isolation from other believers. To use a popular illustration: The coal that remains with the pile of coals burns brightly, but when put to the side, all alone, the coal is quickly extinguished. Such is the state of a believer’s spiritual life. Burning brightly requires community. This truth is especially poignant in prison, a place of loneliness and separation. As believers, we have been adopted into the family of God.<sup>15</sup> Families have squabbles, but conflict can be overcome with love, compassion, and forgiveness. Bitterness takes root when someone seeks to avoid problems or people instead of addressing them and dealing with them. Every believer is an important member of the body of Christ.<sup>16</sup> In order for the parts of the body of Christ to function effectively, the members must function harmoniously. The fruit of the Spirit enables exactly this form of living.

Believers in prison literally live with their church twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. This situation increases the pressure to perform or live well in front of the ever-watching eyes of the household of faith. In prison, there seems to be a major shift between depending on the Spirit of Christ to depending on doing or abstaining from doing certain things. Navigating this shift adds

stress to an already highly stressful situation, induces anxiety for those who are already struggling with personal battles with sin, and engenders a defeatist mentality. Many believers in prison already feel like positive living is impossible because of how they think others perceive them and because of the challenges of life in prison. When a believer fails in some way and the community of faith runs them through the proverbial wringer of judgmental attitudes, avoidance, or excommunication, the desire to either isolate, work harder, or give up may seem overwhelming.

I know the problem, the struggle, of trying to justify myself through right actions. A proper understanding of justification and sanctification freed me from the confines of legalism. Before gaining a proper understanding, I endeavored to obey God’s law in order to earn his favor. When I faltered in complete obedience, I was filled with guilt and shame for my failure. A fear of the Lord’s displeasure consumed me. The anticipation of punishment haunted me. The fruit of the Spirit vanished from my life, because I was more focused on my personal performance than on the one who performed for me—Jesus Christ. A loving Christian brother came along side of me in my misery and helped me understand that my performance neither gained, nor secured my salvation. This brother helped me understand that God does not look for perfection, but at direction. I was freed from the bondage of legalism by understanding that I am justified—declared righteous—despite my performance and that my sanctification process is a purging of sin in order to grow closer to and glorify God, instead of a means to garner favor with God. This liberation enables me to live in the joy of the Lord. 

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Romans 5:1, ESV.

<sup>2</sup> Geisler, Norman. 2011. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Bethany House, 848.

<sup>3</sup> Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 856.

<sup>4</sup> Mahaney, C. J. 2006. *Living the Cross Centered Life*. New York, NY: Multnomah, 118.

<sup>5</sup> Mahaney, *Living the Cross Centered Life*, 118-119.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 6:6, 11, 13.

<sup>7</sup> 1 John 1:9.

<sup>8</sup> Galatians 2:21.

<sup>9</sup> Eric Thoennes. 2011. *Biblical Doctrine: An Overview*. In *The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2531. Cf. Isa. 64:9.

<sup>10</sup> John 10:28.

<sup>11</sup> Romans 8:38-39.

<sup>12</sup> Revelation 21:4.

<sup>13</sup> John 15:5.

<sup>14</sup> John 3:17.

<sup>15</sup> Galatians 4:6-7.

<sup>16</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:12-31.

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## The Trenches of Transformation: Identifying & Overcoming Struggles

Johnathan Simpkins

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your care on Him, because He cares about you.

—1 Peter 1:5-7

The Christian must identify and overcome the troublesome trenches of transformation. Oftentimes, the cares of Christians are contrary to the cares of the Lord, and the Christ-like humility God desires in Christians remains a far cry away from what is actually exuded. When Christians get caught up in the throes of sin and worldly concerns, they fail to recognize the love of Christ nurturing them along the journey and through the obstacles. In other words, the present struggles veil the transformation taking place. What lies at the core of the Christian's struggle with transformation? The core of the Christian struggle with transformation is failing to embrace God's love and then loving Him in return. A genuine transformation in Christ invigorates the life of the Christian once certain struggles, certain trenches of transformation, are understood: the struggle with identity, the struggle with the process of change, and the struggle with forgiveness.

The love of God resides at the crux of Christian transformation. Beginning to understand this love entails grappling with the truths of Scripture in order to learn to operate out of the spiritual nature of Christ, a nature far removed from that sinful nature that has long served as the life-guiding system. As Christians, we have to pay much attention to the fact that we bring heaps of "baggage" into our union with Christ. This baggage hinders the process of transforming into the new and true identity of being in Christ. In regards to the American identity, Walter Brueggemann posits: "For I believe the crisis in the U.S. church. . . has everything to do with giving up on the faith and discipline of our Christian baptism and settling for a common, generic U.S. identity that is part patriotism, part consumerism, part violence, and part affluence."<sup>2</sup> Many Americans have built their identity around icons, fame, trends, and political parties, having never questioned these identifications. We Christians must separate from such identities

and understand our unique God-given identity.

Every person who resides in prison lives in a micro-society within the macro-society of America, which causes an extra layer of identity struggle—the stigma of having committed a crime. The transgressions against society and its members further corrupts a sense of identity and exacerbates the struggle to identify with Christ. This identity-grappling further impedes the transformation

into Christlikeness. This identity crisis causes intense struggles in the spiritual life. Often, a Christian prisoner sees only the false identity of the old self. This reflection in the mirror causes feelings of inadequacy and guilt that inhibits the grasping of God's love and identification in Christ.

The ultimate language of God's love was manifested through the sacrificial actions of Jesus Christ. Through this sacrifice, Jesus clothes His followers

in His righteousness, and the Holy Spirit takes up residence in a believer's heart, providing an identity that could be obtained by no other means.<sup>3</sup> The immaculate beauty of God's love is best understood in light of its unconditional nature: He knows the corrupted condition of humanity and loves people right where they are. When a person understands God's unconditional love, an automatic response of love is cultivated from sheer appreciation for His love.

Loving God in response to His love fuels the transformation process, enabling a person to overcome the inherent struggles along the way. Some who reside in prison have literally grown up in prison. The struggles of attempting to mature as a person while in prison exacerbates the struggles of trying to mature as a Christian. The apostle Paul's reference to the state of humanity prior to Christ can help incarcerated individuals understand that the struggles are not unique to individuals in prison, but normative for all, because all people "were alienated and hostile in [our] minds be-



Barry Mintz

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cause of [our] evil actions.”<sup>4</sup> This declaration reiterates God’s unconditional love. Even in the midst of rebellion against Him, God’s love was present and prevalent. This understanding can strengthen the incarcerated individual in the midst of transitioning from identification in the old self to identity in Christ.

We Christians often misconstrue the concept of transformation, because we wish for the change to be instant and easy, instead of the gradual process that requires time and discipline. Casey Tygrett beautifully asserts, “Allowing the spirit of Jesus to redeem and renew past pain for the sake of our spiritual formation is not perfect or painless in and of itself. Any process of change requires a form of dying, of letting go of structures and conceptions that hold us in the place of suffering or stagnancy.”<sup>5</sup> The transformation process consists of suffering, stagnancy, and setbacks, but loving obedience to the Lord is the key to breaking down those impediments. Yet, God provides and longs to bring His people through the fires of adversity to ultimate triumph in Christ. Christ artfully uses the struggles by turning them into a unique, stunning testimony to His love and power.

When the love of Christ is made tangibly real, we realize we created many of the stumbling blocks by not completely casting all our cares upon Him. We muddy the trenches with futile attempts to earn freedom from guilt and shame, instead of leaving all merit in the Redeemer’s hands. For prisoners, especially, increased guilt and shame from past mistakes create additional trenches through which the war must be waged. Many get mired in frustration from an inability to live out their transformation in society due to confinement in prison, with no opportunity for release regardless of complete transformation. The incapacity to help family, better society, or shake the stigma of incarceration causes great struggle, but also the great opportunity to know, love, and accept the beautiful truth of life in and with Christ.

People mistakenly think they cannot be themselves or enjoy any things of the world in a godly manner. However, your “swag” does not have to be gone, country accent disregarded, nor love for rock music thrown by the wayside. God does not focus on these minor matters, but on the inward heart change and relationship with Him. Timothy Keller expounds on the importance of each believer’s uniqueness in Christ: “There are some deeds that only we can do, some hands that only we can hold, some hurts that only we can heal, because of the unique person he is making us to be.”<sup>6</sup> Instead of forgetting their past, their life experiences, and personality, Christ wants His followers to live out His transformative nature through their unique personalities, ministering from the past experiences into their specific contexts. The Lord refines us like precious metals, so that the diverse body of Christ operates out of His righteousness while spreading the gospel to a world in desperate need.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout my process of transformation and corresponding conversations in the prison setting, a common narrative has emerged pertaining to struggles with forgiveness. Ironically, this common rhetoric espouses the denial of forgiveness for oppres-

sors, racists, bigots, criminals with certain charges, and an adversary of previous conflict, while at the same time pleading for a second chance at freedom or forgiveness from their loved ones based on their transformation. A struggle to forgive hinders a person’s process of transformation in Christ. Understanding forgiveness in Christ involves the availability of that forgiveness to all. Uprooting the trench of unforgiveness facilitates transformation.

Personally, I was on a hazardous journey, battling to forgive my codefendant, family members, friends, and several others around me. The working in my life of the gospel of Jesus Christ was masked by this unforgiveness. As a result, my spiritual transformation was hindered due to my lack of obedience to the Lord I claimed to love. Jesus asks, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and don’t do the things I say?”<sup>8</sup> Transformation begins with the acceptance of Christ who has forgiven, and continues with obedience to Him in practicing neighbor-love by forgiving, in spite of any situations or circumstances. The struggle to forgive plagues the mind and troubles the heart, obstructing the transformation process.

Each individual’s struggles with transformation may look different, but peace comes from knowing that the struggles with identity, the process of change, and forgiveness are normative. In the trenches of transformation, life and ministry can get messy. Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (SEBTS) received a backlash from society for partnering to provide opportunities for spiritual growth and education to the incarcerated through the North Carolina Field Minister Program (NCFMP). Due to unforgiveness, many members of society, including many in the church, deem prisoners unworthy of the finances, personal investments, and time involved in this program. All people, incarcerated or free, suffer from the universal struggle with sin. Many people in the church judge people in prison as if this struggle is not universal. The Lord Jesus was sent to all the world, to heal the brokenhearted and “proclaim liberty to the captives and freedom to the prisoners” suffering and struggling under the bondage of sin.<sup>9</sup> I can personally testify to the fruit being produced in the lives and through the ministry of the participants of the NCFMP. Field Ministers are already affecting countless lives in and outside of these prison walls. This impact proves individuals, incarcerated and otherwise, can overcome the trenches and live a transformed life in Christ. 

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter 5:6-7

<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. 2017. *A Way Other Than Our Own: Devotions for Lent*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2-3.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21

<sup>4</sup> Colossians 1:21

<sup>5</sup> Casey Tygrett. 2019. *As I Recall: Discovering the Place of Memories in Our Spiritual Life*. Downers Grove: IVP Books, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Keller, Timothy. 2016. *Preaching*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 139.

<sup>7</sup> Malachi 3:3

<sup>8</sup> Luke 6:46

<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 61:1

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# Rising from Obscurity: The NCFMP Initiative

Thomas Wheeler

In *Just Mercy*, Bryan Stevenson documents his battle against systemic injustice in the criminal *justice* system. While sharing his story at a small African American church in Alabama, he notices an older black gentleman in a wheelchair making intense eye contact during the talk. Afterward, the man corners Stevenson: “Do you know what you’re doing?” Stevenson freezes, so the older gentleman enters the silence to answer his own rhetorical question: “You’re beating the drum for justice!”

Then, the old man tilts his head and pulls Stevenson close: “You see this scar at the top of my head? I got that scar in Green County, Alabama, trying to register to vote in 1964.” Still holding onto Stevenson, he points to a four-inch scar: “I got that scar in Mississippi demanding civil rights.” Lowering his head once more, “You see that mark? I got that bruise in Birmingham after the Children’s Crusade.” Eyes shimmering with tears and passion, he confesses, “People think these are my scars, cuts, and bruises. These aren’t my scars, cuts, and bruises. These are my medals of honor.”<sup>1</sup> Bryan Stevenson’s encounter with this older gentleman spotlights a profound truth about the pursuit of justice—justice always comes at a cost.

Jesus advises anyone commencing a great undertaking—such as the pursuit of justice—to count the cost.<sup>2</sup> Heroes of the faith record the cost of pursuing justice and redemption in the ledger of their life experiences; written with the ink of their blood, sweat, and tears; etched in their scars, cuts, and bruises. The willingness to pay this cost stems from passion driven by pain at the sight of injustice and from compassion derived from Christ. In other words, justice and redemption reside in and flow from hearts and minds transformed by Christ. This transformation compels the pursuit of justice and redemption—no matter the cost.

The United States of America continues to face many forms of injustice. Yet, one of these forms often gets overlooked: mass incarceration. Mass incarceration “refers to the United States’ excessive use of imprisonment—we have 25 percent of the world’s prisoners with just 5 percent of the world’s population.”<sup>3</sup> In America, there are over 4,500 facilities dedicated to incarceration, a 400% increase since 1980.<sup>4</sup> The upsurge in the prison pop-

ulation equates to a runaway locomotive barreling down the imperialistic tracks of the criminal justice system. Mass incarceration is much more than the number of people in jails and prisons:

Mass incarceration is actually one of this country’s key strategies for addressing problems of poverty, inequality, unemployment, racial conflict, citizenship, sexuality, and gender, as well as crime. Hence, when we talk about mass incarceration, we are not speaking only of prison cells or the War on Drugs...Ultimately, mass incarceration is about opportunity—new opportunities for profit and political power for some and the denial of opportunity to others, largely poor people of color.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, the pursuit of justice and redemption must entail addressing mass incarceration. Federal and state governments continue to avoid the issue of mass incarceration. This matters to every person, because of the “collateral consequences,” the devastating aftershocks in the lives of affected individuals, families, and the community: economic deprivation, socialization concerns, and marginalization. Children of inmates often experience a crumbling of the foundation of their lives due to these aftershocks. The socioeconomic dynamics of the community are directly impaired by the high rate of incarceration. Also, the community an offender is removed from is quite often the community the offender returns

to upon release, which brings the issue of recidivism to the forefront.

As ex-offenders, or returning citizens, reintegrate into the community, they face large fees related to probation or parole: supervision, drug testing, a vehicle interlock device (for DUIs), electronic devices, mandatory treatment, therapy, and classes—on top of the costs of housing, food, clothing, and transportation. Additionally, they must start from zero in finding suitable employment to pay for everything. This economic catch-22 essentially snares people in the revolving door of the prison system. Returning citizens often fail to assimilate into society, because the multitude of obstacles stacked against them and the prison system’s failure to prepare them for transition. They return home no better than when they first went to prison. The darkness of mass incarceration is immense, but not impenetrable.

In 1650, English theologian Thomas Fuller wrote a religious

**Federal and state governments continue to avoid the issue of mass incarceration**

travelogue in which he declared, “It is always darkest just before the day dawneth.”<sup>6</sup> This hour in America’s criminal justice history is its darkest ever; let us hope it gets no darker and this looming presence of darkness signifies the approach of dawn. On the horizon, rising from obscurity, comes the twilight of justice and redemption—the North Carolina Field Minister Program (NCFMP). In August of 2017, the NCFMP pierced the darkness of North Carolina’s prison system through the partnership of the state’s Department of Public Safety, Game Plan for Life (GPL), an initiative of Joe Gibbs Racing, and The College at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

As the number of advocacy groups lobbying for prison reform grows, their effort tries to penetrate the darkness from the outside. These groups approach reform from an *outside-in* perspective. While well-intentioned and necessary, their first and primary area of influence is the community outside of prison—not the inside prison community. Justice and redemption must focus not only on the restoration of community relationships, but also the offender’s relationship to the community, reconnection that must begin while the offender is still inside of the prison system. Combatting the mass incarceration juggernaut requires an equally massive initiative. Addressing mass incarceration requires engagement from the outside and the inside. The NCFMP can fulfill the *inside-out* portion of the solution.

The apostle Paul understood the value of prison ministry more than most. In his address to the Corinthians, Paul states, “For I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant to all, that I might gain the more.”<sup>7</sup> Paul then writes of becoming as the Jew, the one under the law, the weak, in order to reach all. Therein lies the answer—transformation through theology! In other words, unto the prisoner one must become as a prisoner to gain the prisoners. The Field Ministers (FMs) can best reach prisoners, because they are prisoners.

This approach finds its foundation and inspiration in Jesus Christ. Writing to the church in Philippi, Paul declares that Jesus Christ “made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.”<sup>8</sup> In his great humility, God descended from heaven in the person of Jesus Christ (incarnation), assimilated the nature of a servant, and while in the likeness of mankind, sacrificed his life to save whosoever believes in him. Just as God humbled himself in the likeness of mankind to reach humanity, so must the faithful FMs humble themselves in the likeness of Christ to reach the prisoner. Field Ministers possess the rare opportunity to live among the inmate community, twenty-four hours a day, in an effort to lead them to Christ.

This Christological approach to transformation cannot be accomplished by the well-intentioned advocates of prison reform, because they cannot become as a prisoner to gain the prisoner. FMs can, have, and continue to do this alongside ministry. By working from the *inside-out*, FMs become an integral part of the effort to combat recidivism. The NCFMP can reach the deepest recesses of the prison environment by preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and serving their fellow prisoners with Christ-like love. Through this engagement, FMs can help lower the recidivism rate, which will raise the well-being of the community. As prisoners become returning citizens, these former prisoners who experienced transformation can benefit the community to which they return. The goal of the NCFMP is to change the prison culture by transforming the hearts and minds of individuals in prison while they live inside the prison system, so that they may become productive members of first the inside prison community, then the outside community upon release.

God chooses to work his life changing miracles through the redeemed inmates of the NCFMP, not only to change the culture of prison, but also to transform the culture of the outside community. In the words of Jesus Christ: “Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.”<sup>9</sup> FMs must die to self so that the life of Christ may bud in the hearts of the broken souls around them. By paying the cost of justice with this breaking, FMs can impact their fellow prisoners, the prison community, and the whole of society—a distinct ministry that recognizes just how special every person, every life is to God—in prison and out. This hour in America’s criminal justice system may be its darkest ever, but the light rising from obscurity in the emergence of the NCFMP illuminates hope for those within the darkness that justice and redemption are not only possible, but on the horizon. 

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Stevenson, Bryan. 2014. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 45-46.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 14:28.

<sup>3</sup> Kilgore, James. 2015. *Understanding Mass Incarceration: A People’s Guide to the Key Civil Rights Struggle of Our Time*. New York: The New Press, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Gottschalk, Marie. 2015. *The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Note: This figure does include people under continual state supervision on parole, and those under the control of the Department of Homeland Security.

<sup>5</sup> Kilgore, 2015, *Understanding Mass Incarceration*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Fuller, Thomas. *A Pisgah Sight of Palestine and the Confines Thereof; with the History of the Old and New Testament Acted Thereon* (1650; London: William Tegg, 1869), 208.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians. 9:9.

<sup>8</sup> Philippians 2:7-8.

<sup>9</sup> John 12:24.

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# Our Warfare: The Spiritual Battles of the Incarcerated

## Christopher Burk

“Count time! Count time!” The shouts of the booth officer and glare of the bright lights shatter the best dream that I have had in years. Begrudgingly, I shake off the dream, pull myself up for the dreaded morning count, and begin another *fabulous* day at Nash Correctional Institution. I go through my morning ritual of prayer and devotion, then prepare for what I think will be a good day. Refreshed and ready to go, I head into the dayroom to watch the news and wait for chow call. Without warning, I am stuck in the middle of an argument between two other men. Things get heated, voices escalate, threats are made. I am forced to make a decision of what, if anything, to do, a decision that could change the outcome of this day—maybe even affect the rest of my life. Later in the day, I return from study hall and drop down on my bunk to take a short nap. As I lie there, lustful thoughts start flooding my mind. Another decision must be made, with another string of consequences. Why do people, specifically Christians, encounter these challenges? Although I pray and attempt to be obedient, the evils of the prison environment continue to attack from seemingly all directions: other inmates, staff members, family situations, my own moral predicaments, and even demonic attacks. Who is behind all of this trouble? What can be done about it?

### The Enemy

Reformation theologian John Calvin names Satan as the enemy. Also, Calvin hauntingly sums up the staggering power of the enemy behind the evil that humans face: “Be forewarned of the constant presence of an enemy, the *most daring*, the *most powerful*, the *most crafty*, the most *indefatigable*, the most *completely equipped* with all the engines and the most expert in the science of war.”<sup>1</sup> Calvin describes Satan as a formidable enemy, an enemy who has thousands of years of practice at wreaking havoc in the lives of human beings, both Christians and non-Christians. Charles Spurgeon concurs: “He [Satan] is so crafty, that he understands human nature better than human nature understands itself.”<sup>2</sup> When a person tries to fight alone, this enemy knows all the buttons to push, when to push them, and where. Furthermore, he may attack through other people, nature, sickness, technology, or demonic forces. In Ephesians 6:12, the apostle Paul warns, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” For incarcerated individuals, these attacks are especially daunting,

because the arena is a confined space, with nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. Without a more powerful advocate to call upon, the inmate’s efforts are futile.

### Types of Evil

Spiritual warfare generally combats two specific types of evil. The first and most common type is *moral* evil: “the evil people believe and do, the element of responsibility: it means sin, wickedness, iniquity, lies.”<sup>3</sup> Moral evil results when a person succumbs to the moral temptations or works of the flesh. Galatians 5:19-21 lists these: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and other things that originate from desires of the flesh. Incarcerated individuals have at some time permitted the presence of such moral evils in their daily lives. Furthermore, the prison environment can exponentially increase the potential to succumb to any one of these evils. The confined, crowded, hot, and oppressive prison environment, combined with a perpetual void of purpose, forms a breeding ground for the wiles of the devil.

The second common type of evil that people encounter is *situational* evil: “the evil we experience—the element of consequences: it means suffering, hardship, unpleasant and harmful events, death. One distinction of situational evil is that both God and Satan use it, with opposite intentions, Satan to harm us, God to chasten sinners, purifying his people and judging those who rebel.”<sup>4</sup> Examples of situational evils are natural disasters, wars, sickness (COVID-19), accidents, demonic attacks, and attacks that emanate from other people, the final being the most common situational evil in prison. When Christians encounter this type of evil, the key is to remember the identity of the real enemy. The perceived attacker may be human, but the evil force behind the attack is he who Calvin described—Satan himself.

### Types of Spiritual Warfare

*For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.*

—Paul, 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

The foremost type of spiritual warfare in the Christian warrior's arsenal is *classical* spiritual warfare. Classical spiritual warfare can be used to combat all types of evil and "is predominately focused on keeping one's soul holy by resisting sin and worldly temptations."<sup>5</sup> Although this battle strategy seems simple, like Paul's directive to *take every thought captive to obey Christ*, implementing the plan is not simple, because people cannot do this on their own. Only in and through Christ can a person take captive every thought, thereby "keeping one's soul holy." The fight is not one of practice sparring, but extreme, lethal warfare; Jesus warns that the devil—the author of lies—comes to steal, kill, and destroy. Therefore, the Christian combatant must put on "the whole armor of God that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm."<sup>6</sup> This armor metaphor represents the main weapons of spiritual warfare: truth, readiness, faith, salvation, the Bible, and most importantly—prayer. Success in warfare depends on preparation, or *preventive action*—being prepared before the battle begins rather than reacting to the enemy.<sup>7</sup> Jesus himself provides an example of this type of warfare when tempted in the wilderness by the devil. Jesus is prepared with the Word, and immediately strikes against Satan to thwart the attack and go on the offensive: "It is written."<sup>8</sup> Jesus, the Word himself, used the Word. His example shows that being ready by knowing Scripture and having faith in the Word works to counter the temptations of moral evil and reduce the effect of situational evil.

A second type of warfare is *deliverance* or *ekballistic* spiritual warfare. *Ekballistic* comes from the Greek root word that means "to drive or send out." This type of warfare is specific to the situational evil of internal demonic forces. The Bible depicts warring against the presence of demons, and Jesus gives the apostles authority over all the demons.<sup>9</sup> New Testament writers do not offer much advice about demon possession, but when Jesus and the apostles do cast-out demons, it is from non-believers only. Although an argument from silence, this seems to communicate that Christians are immune from demonic possession. Yet, Christians are still prone to demonic oppression, to being the target of demonic attack. Therefore, a systematic approach is required to combat this demonic oppression: Christians must grow in the knowledge of Christ, be strong in prayer, discern the reason for the attack, and understand and exercise the authority of Christ.<sup>10</sup> Knowing Christ and praying in his name provides a powerful, effective strategy.

#### **Warfare in the Prison Context of the Field Minister**

The North Carolina Field Minister Program (NCFMP) provides a training ground for Christian spiritual warriors. Christians who graduate are prepared to be prayer warriors, intermediaries,

listeners, and helpers. Personally, this past year my mother became ill from complications of dementia while in an assisted care facility. She needed an emergency procedure to reduce the congestion in her heart and lungs. However, the hospitals were overrun with COVID-19 patients, and, therefore, were unable to help her in time. She succumbed to heart failure. I was simultaneously filled with anger and grief, angry at the system, while mourning the loss of my mother. Although I am strong in my faith, the presence of my Christian-brother-prayer-warriors turned my anger to a celebration of her life and comforted me in my time of mourning. In times of the different manifestations of evil, Christian Field Ministers can be a light in the darkness, being prepared to lay hands upon the afflicted in prayer, delivering them from evil and lifting them up in Christ.

Evil exists. In order to combat its power and influence, Christians must avoid idleness, take every thought captive to obey Christ, stay involved with the church, study the Word, and pray continuously. Paul offers further reassurance: "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angel nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."<sup>11</sup> Armed with this reassurance, faith in Christ, the training to take thoughts captive in Christ, and a committed prayer life, Christians can wage war effectively in the spiritual battles faced while incarcerated and going forward. 

#### **Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* 1.14.13.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Spurgeon. 1969. "God with Us," *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, containing sermons preached and revised during the year 1866, Volume X, Sermon 580, Pilgrim Publishers, 409.

<sup>3</sup> David Powlison. 1995. *Power Encounters: Reclaiming Spiritual Warfare*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 65.

<sup>4</sup> Powlison, *Power Encounters*, 65.

<sup>5</sup> Aiken, Peter. 2015. "Should Reformed Believers Engage in Spiritual Warfare?" *Puritan Reformed Journal*. (7(1)), 245.

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 6:13.

<sup>7</sup> Lawless, Chuck. 2002. *Discipled Warriors: Growing Healthy Churches that are Equipped for Spiritual Warfare*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic and Professional, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 4:4.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 9:1.

<sup>10</sup> Arnold, Clinton E. 2015. *Short Answers to Big Questions About God, the Bible, and Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 118.

<sup>11</sup> Romans 8:38-39.

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## Fuel for the Fire: A Message to Christians Trying to Live Without Prayer

Timothy Johnson

“Timothy, you are missing out on what I have for you,” the voice of the Lord broke through the turmoil of my mind. God lovingly warned, “I have something special for you, but if you do not leave this foolishness behind, it will be too late. Don’t miss out on My plan for your life; you have already missed out on so much.” Absolute truth: missed opportunity defined my life. After high school, I entered NC State University thanks to a full academic scholarship. Instead of working hard to maximize my potential, I treated that potential like garbage tossed in the dumpster behind the seafood restaurant, carelessly throwing away my talents and every opportunity. Now serving a prison sentence of life without parole, I was numbered among the discarded and forgotten.

Miserable in the dumpster of addiction, but overwhelmed by the hopelessness of a never-ending prison term, the familiar refuse of drugs, pride, and selfish choices entrapped me. I loathed the path of steep, constant ups and downs, but could sustain only phases of moving in an upward, positive trajectory. Years before, Jesus Christ claimed me as his own. For the first six years of incarceration, I followed Jesus wholeheartedly, refusing to compromise, but eventually entered the downward spiral of compromise, initially to self-medicate for severe, unremitting back pain, then to achieve a sense of escape from prison. Since then, I maintained only interludes of focus on Christ. For months or even a year at a time, I followed Christ, but eventually returned to the garbage pile.

In that dank, dark prison cell, I fell to my knees, fists clenched, crying out to God: “I am sorry, Lord, please rescue me. I know you are real and I want to surrender all to you. Show me how to get on fire for you and stay on fire for you.” God reached into that trash heap and rescued me, lifting me from the waste, cleaning off the filth and grime, then recycling me and my life.

God used a popular movie-based book to restore and instruct me. First, he revealed that my laziness toward the discipline of

prayer was the culprit, robbing me of the fuel necessary to keep that fire, that zeal for the Lord, burning radiantly. Then, God used the book version of *War Room*, by Chris Fabry and the Kendrick Brothers, to teach me a lesson of eternal significance: Prayer is essential to the Christian walk, because it provides the fuel that

ignites and feeds the fire for Jesus Christ. Prayer keeps the Christian disciple’s relationship with Jesus burning brightly each and every day.

My pitifully inept Christian walk resembled a muscular, powerful Shelby Mustang GT500 that never got filled with more than five gallons of gas. The vehicle itself was spectacular, a fine specimen of craftsmanship, and even performed astonishingly for a while. However, the high-performance machine never got far, because the vehicle quickly ran out of gas. The insufficiency of fuel from lack of prayer left me stranded on the side of this road we call “life.”

A cycle of breakdown clearly emerges: A wake-up call brings a partial refilling of the tank with only five gallons of gas; the engine roars and the Christ-fire burns; the limited fuel drains and smother

the fire; repeat. Spiritual revival gives way to spiritual decline. I drift back into the same traps of sin. The inherent stresses of daily life extinguish the fire and pull me back into the downward spiral of compromise. When called to surrender, to pick up my cross and follow Christ, I hide in fear.

Controlling fear consumed every cell of my body—the fear to miss out on something, some fun, some pleasure. Drugs and a party lifestyle became much of my life as a student at NC State. Yet, I found neither fun nor pleasure in losing that scholarship and missing the opportunities to graduate, begin a career, get married, and start a family. The regret of killing two men, getting incarcerated during my senior year, receiving a life sentence, and crushing the hopes of my family, put my spirit through a meat grinder of torment. After drugs had robbed me of so much, why did I repeatedly return to them? What could I possibly miss?



Timothy Jonson & Dr. Akin

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Merely two years before the night God rescued me from the disposal bin, while confined to the Segregation Unit because of an investigation resulting from my involvement in drugs, I rededicated my life to Christ. In a cell with ice forming on the walls, I shivered and pledged: “God, I am done with drugs, from running from Your call on my life. Take me and do what you want.” My family was promised: “I am done—no more drugs.” They rejoiced at this answer to their many late-night prayers. Unfortunately, I did not keep that promise; just one more broken promise in number, but another stab to their heart-filled love for me. Three months later, I got high, once again disappointing them and running from God’s plan for me. I kept failing because I foolishly tried to live the Christian life by my own strength and power.

Like Gideon hiding in the winepress, threshing wheat, I was scared to answer the call, afraid of what the future might hold if I totally surrendered to God and relinquished my resistance to the plan He has for my life. When the Angel of the Lord said to Gideon: “The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor,” Gideon responded weakly, “O my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our Fathers told us about” (Judges 6:12-13). Exactly like Gideon, I required numerous interventions from the Lord before answering the call to rise up. The inability to move forward in my relationship with Jesus Christ was dreadfully frustrating and made me feel like Gideon hiding from the enemy. I did not want to be a seller and user of drugs. The tumultuous back-and-forth littered my life with shattered dreams and broken promises. The snares of pride, anger, and drug addiction wreaked havoc in my life and in my relationships with those who mattered most—the loving family who stood by me despite all of my many mistakes. Even after all of the hurt, my family wanted only for me to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ.

Earlier in the day of that transformative night, my parents and I prayed at the end of a delightful visit. Then, I returned to the dorm, planning to attend church in the evening. The plan vanished, replaced with compromise. A friend waited with an offer. Andy asked: “Do you want to smoke some 2?” referring to synthetic marijuana, commonly called “K2” or just “2.” As if someone else controlled my mouth, without even a moment of hesitation, I responded: “Yes, absolutely.” Inside, I screamed “No!” He handed me a small bag of the dangerously potent narcotic. I went in my cell, got everything prepared, and got high. No joy. No pleasure. Only total desolation that I had fallen again. That night, sober, my eyes overflowed with tears. Responding to the voice of God, I got up from that cold, hard, concrete floor, grabbed the bag of K2 from the miniature, wall-mounted steel desk, and quickly threw the rest

of that garbage, that toxic substance, in the toilet. I flushed the trash and the waste of addiction from my life.

Turning from the toilet, the book on my bed mat pulled my attention. That book, *War Room*, impacted my life in a remarkable way. After checking out the book from the prison library earlier in the week, I started reading it, but did not get far. Restarting the reading, the book captivated me. God spoke to me through the characters of Elizabeth, Tony, and, especially, Ms. Clara. At their first meeting, Ms. Clara uses a lukewarm cup of coffee to make a point to Elizabeth about being in a relationship with the Lord. When Elizabeth takes a sip of the disgusting, tepid coffee, Ms. Clara tells her, “Elizabeth, people drink their coffee hot or cold. But nobody likes it lukewarm. Not even the Lord.” The message from Ms. Clara spoke directly to me. When Ms. Clara urges, “Elizabeth, you got to plead with God so that He can do what only He can do, and then you got to get out of the way and let Him do what only He can do,” I heard God telling me, “Timothy, this is precisely what you must do.” He showed me that the absence of a dedication to prayer was my primary failure as a Christian and that this failure emptied my Christian life of the fuel needed for the fire.

Ms. Clara’s teaching Elizabeth all about prayer—its absolute essentialness to the Christian life, how to become a prayer warrior, the importance of praying with fervency and specificity, the value of keeping a prayer journal—imparted these lessons to me. God delivered me completely, permanently from the landfill of addiction. A few days later, when Andy came to my cell door with that familiar offer, “Do you want to smoke some 2?” my immediate response was: “No, I’m good.” That automatic “No” became my default setting; no need for a decision-making process.

Five years later, God has continued to work in my life in astounding, miraculous, and eternally significant ways. My fire for him may wane occasionally, but not for long. I refuel the fire by spending time in passionate, focused prayer. Through this prayer, God continues to work in my life and the lives of others.

No longer an afterthought or a burden, the discipline of prayer is an absolute priority and a stunning blessing. God used *War Room* to renew me and the course of my life, to teach me that prayer is essential to walking with Christ, and to show me that the Christian life, not the party life, is the one not to be missed. The Shelby Mustang GT500 of my Christian life is full of gas, engine roaring, primed for the greatest ride of all. The days of missing out are over for this prayer warrior. Prayer truly is the fuel that keeps a Christian on fire, passionately serving the Lord. 

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# Creative Cuisine

## Tony's Microwave Caramel Popcorn

**Ingredients:**

orange juice (for the acid)  
1 bag of (microwave) popcorn  
1 bag of peanuts (3.5 oz.)  
1 cup of sugar

**Makes:**

3 batches

**Needs:**

A hard-plastic bowl (soft-plastic will melt)  
A wooden/hard-plastic stirrer (mine is made from popsicle sticks)  
Implement to measure out ingredients (mine is a medicine bottle)  
A potholder to lift hot bowl with  
A large bowl in which to mix caramel into popcorn

**Directions:**

1. Pop the popcorn; shake out un-popped kernels through a vent hole in the top of the bag.
2. Transfer a third of the popcorn into the soft plastic bowl, add 1/3 bag of peanuts, and mix.
3. Pour a little more than 4 Tbsp. of sugar and about 1 Tbsp. of OJ into the hard plastic bowl, and stir.
4. Microwave for about 2 ½ to 3 minutes, watching for mixture to turn medium brown; you don't want it to burn, and you don't want it undercooked (grainy). You may want to place a few damp paper towels under the bowl to prevent damage to bowl.
5. Carefully, remove the bowl from the microwave using the potholder. It will be hot enough to burn you!
6. Quickly but carefully drizzle the caramel mixture over the popcorn and peanut mixture with wooden/plastic stirrer.
7. Mix well to coat the popcorn and peanuts evenly with the caramel.
8. It will still be dangerously hot, so do not let the caramel touch your fingers.
9. Repeat twice with the remaining popcorn and peanuts. Enjoy!

## North Carolina Field Minister Program

The North Carolina Field Minister Program (NCFMP) is a joint venture of North Carolina Department of Public Safety (DPS), Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (SEBTS), and Game Plan for Life (GPL)—a nonprofit founded by Joe Gibbs. NCFMP administrators select long-term incarcerated persons who receive four years of on-site education and training at Nash Correctional Institution from SEBTS culminating in a Bachelor's in Pastoral Ministry with an emphasis in counseling. Graduates are deployed in small teams to the prisons of North Carolina with the goal of changing the prison culture from inside the culture by mentoring and counseling others who are incarcerated.

AIE represents NCFMP seminary students, active Field Ministers, and all incarcerated people by extension. AIE seeks to inform readers on the situations and challenges faced in the unique ministerial context of people who are incarcerated.

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## A Special Thanks From AIE to All of the People Who Make the NCFMP a Reality



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