



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Articles:

📖 Sermons in a Swiss Prison  
(*Prison*, pp. 55-61)

📖 Spiritual Friendship:  
Portrait of a Prison  
Ministry  
(*Prison*, pp. 62-66)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Dehumanized Prisoners  
(*Prison*, pp. 38-40)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics  
Baylor University  
One Bear Place #97361  
Waco, TX 76798-7361  
Phone 1-866-298-2325  
[www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws)

© 2012 The Center for Christian Ethics

# Spiritual Friendships with Prisoners

If those on the outside are unwilling to be on the receiving end as well as the giving end of the relationship with prisoners, they cannot offer spiritual friendship. Such openness is not easy. It rejects the assumption that those in the free world are by definition better folks than those who are locked up.

### Prayer

Loving God, we praise and thank you for the love and mercy you have shown each of us in Jesus Christ. You have fed us with your Word, and challenged us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

God of justice, we remember before you all prisoners and those who care for them, that they may see in each other your image. We especially pray for prisoners who have been unjustly accused. May those in positions to review evidence seek justice for all, so that your will be done.

We pray in the name of our Savior Jesus Christ, who was persecuted, who died that we might live, who rose to reign as the King of Kings, and who will come again to establish his reign of perfect peace. Amen.

### Scripture Reading: Isaiah 42:6-8

### Reflection

The worship services which theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) led in the city prison in Basel, Switzerland, near the end of his life were "carefully crafted ... [to] proclaim a specific message," John Thompson reports. The "prayers that bookend each sermon, a brief Scripture verse, the homily, and Communion ... remind prisoner and non-prisoner of the common brotherhood they share through Jesus Christ." The petitionary prayers enlist the congregants in praying and caring for a wide range of people, the Scripture passages focus on God's redeeming love for all through Christ Jesus, and the celebration of the Lord's Supper draws all the participants into the Body of Christ. In *Church Dogmatics* Barth describes how Communion unites all Christians: "They are so linked together by Christ who links himself to them that they 'mutually adapt themselves to be one organism which can be used in the world in His service.'" Communion, he says, makes the Church a "mobile brotherhood," and by concluding the worship services at Basel Prison with this practice Barth included those labeled "prisoner" as a part of this family.

Barth "bears witness to the great gift we might receive when visiting those in prison; a gift that can be known only by those who are willing to follow Jesus behind walls of concrete and bars of iron," Thompson concludes. "To look upon the incarcerated and see not criminals or convicts but rather brothers and sisters, for this is how Jesus sees them, reminds us of the great grace given to us which offers freedom from our chains. Jesus came to free us from our captivity. As we are all delivered captives, we are also all brothers and sisters."

Embracing our equality before God is essential to nurturing spiritual friendships in prison ministry, Dick Allison knows from



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2012 The Center for Christian Ethics

experience. "Everyone involved in a spiritual friendship has 'sinned and come short of the glory of God.' It is equally true that everyone involved is a person of worth, created in the image of God and the object of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ," he writes. "Virtually all the prisoners I have ever known have experienced treatment inside and outside the prison system designed to make them feel less than human. Thus they recognize immediately whether an offer of spiritual friendship is genuine."

He recalls visiting a friend on death row with a colleague. "When we met together, a glass partition separated us from any physical contact with him. We talked to one another through a phone. For two hours he was in chains that made holding the phone uncomfortable for him. The noise in the visitation room was overwhelming, but we did not complain because we could look each other in the eye, smile and laugh, cry and pray. We prayed for him and he prayed for us. We knew that we were not just acquaintances; we were partners in a spiritual friendship."

Allison describes several avenues for developing spiritual friendships with prisoners that he has experienced – through visitation in prison, telephone conversations, personal correspondence, sharing of stories and prayers through newsletters, public advocacy of prisoners' rights, and extending church membership. None of these, he is sure, can be genuine Christian ministry unless they are animated by spiritual friendship.

### Study Questions

1. For Karl Barth, what is the basis for his spiritual friendship with the men in Basel Prison?
2. What are the essential ingredients in spiritual friendship? Are there reasons that we find it difficult to be spiritual friends with prisoners?
3. How does each of the six practices described by Dick Allison depend upon and foster spiritual friendship? Discuss how your congregation can participate in some of these practices.
4. Discuss how Francisco Goya depicts the theological travesty of the dehumanization of prisoners in *Third of May, 1808*.

### Departing Hymn: "Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing!" (verses 1, 4, and 8)

Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing  
my great Redeemer's praise,  
the glories of my God and King,  
the triumphs of his grace!

He breaks the power of canceled sin,  
he sets the prisoner free;  
his blood can make the foulest clean,  
his blood availed for me.

Glory to God, and praise and love  
be ever, ever given,  
by saints below and saints above,  
the church in earth and heaven.

Charles Wesley (1739)

Tune: AZMON

# Spiritual Friendship with Prisoners

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To recall Karl Barth's sermons and worship services in Basel prison as an inspiration for developing spiritual friendships with prisoners.
2. To identify the nature of spiritual friendship and consider why we may find it difficult to nurture spiritual friendships with people who are incarcerated.
3. To explore specific practices for nurturing spiritual friendships with prisoners.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prison (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the two focus articles and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Oh, For a Thousand Tongues to Sing!" locate the tune AMZON in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with a Story

In the sermons and worship services in Basel Prison, the theologian Karl Barth constantly emphasized the spiritual brotherhood in Jesus Christ that he and the prisoners shared. Dick Allison tells a story that reveals how important this has been in his spiritual friendships with prisoners. Six of those fifteen friends are members of University Baptist Church in Hattiesburg, MS. "I had the privilege of baptizing three of those men in prison horse troughs following their declarations of faith," Allison writes. "The other one, who is in prison in Georgia, will be baptized as soon as it can be arranged. He is utterly serious about his commitment to Christ and to the Church. Knowing that I have baptized the others during their imprisonment, he says, 'I want to become a member of the Horse Trough Fraternity of Baptized Believers.'

"...There are different levels of spiritual friendship, but it is fair to say that being a part of a body of believers has a profound influence on those who ask for membership. One of the men that I baptized four years ago talked about it again in a letter just a few days ago. And all of them have expressed on numerous occasions what a joy it is to them to feel like they 'belong to a real church.' One says that it is the first time he ever belonged to anything except a 'gang of skinheads.'" (*Prison*, 65)

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer in the study guide together.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Isaiah 42:6-8 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

This study and the next, "Portraits of Prison Ministry," build upon the theological critique of the prison system by articulating some positive ministry responses. At the heart of Christian ministry generally is the formation of spiritual friendships that recognize and embrace our spiritual equality before God. In this study, Karl Barth's ministry in Basel Prison provides a winsome foundation for spiritual friendship with prisoners, and Dick Allison outlines six practices that nurture spiritual relationships with his incarcerated friends. The next study will introduce three innovative ministries to juvenile and adult offenders and their families.

## Study Questions

1. In a sermon about Christ's crucifixion between two thieves, "The Criminals with Him," Karl Barth writes, "If anyone identified himself with prisoners it was [Jesus Christ].... That is the Lord who has mercy on you: this prisoner who is your liberator, the liberator of us all." From the themes in Barth's sermons and the structure of the worship services in Basel Prison, John Thompson concludes that Barth emphasizes "the common brotherhood between prisoner and non-prisoner.... Barth challenges the readers to find solidarity with prisoners; to tear down any dichotomy between the two categories. To do so is to follow Jesus who identified with prisoners. Barth is only asking us to do the same as Christ's disciples."
2. Spiritual friendship goes beyond loving someone and helping that person in practical ways. As a *friendship*, it must be reciprocal; as Dick Allison notes, it "works both ways, with its benefits extending to both parties." It is *spiritual* because the friends' mutual love is grounded in shared spiritual equality: though each one has "sinned and come short of the glory of God," it is equally true that each one "is a person of worth, created in the image of God and the object of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ." Believing this, they can support one another in prayer, worship, study, service to others, and growth in discipleship. Allison admits that sometimes "those on the outside of prisons are not willing to be on the receiving end as well as the giving end of the relationship." He warns that such "openness is not easy. We must get rid of stereotypes. We must get rid of pride that assumes that those in the free world are by definition better folks than those who are locked up." Perhaps it is easier if we have known persons before they were incarcerated. Invite members to share their experiences of friendship with prisoners.
3. Divide members into several small groups to explore the practices. The fifth one, sharing church membership, may be compared with Karl Barth's sharing Communion with the men in Basel Prison: it reminds us of our spiritual equality and mutual responsibilities as members of the Body of Christ. The first three practices – visitation, phone conversations, correspondence – emphasize the need to "keep in touch" with our friends, to share our lives as best we can through regular communication of needs and joys, prayers for one another, and worship with one another. The fourth practice – sharing of our lives through contributions in a newsletter – is a joint activity that draws us together with one another and in service to others. The final practice of advocating for prisoners' rights may seem the most one-sided activity, but it unites us with prisoners in their concerns.

Are members of your congregation or of their extended families incarcerated? If so, they might be the bridge to begin some of these practices of spiritual friendship with prisoners.

4. Francisco Goya's *Third of May, 1808 in Madrid: The Executions on Principe Pio Hill* recalls the scandalous execution of Spanish prisoners by Napoleon's troops. Instead of presenting warfare as noble and strong, Goya emphasizes its senseless brutality and anonymity. He puts the episode into theological relief, Hornik notes, by depicting the prisoner who is about to be killed at point blank range as wearing "a white shirt and yellow pants – the colors of the papacy – and [standing] in the pose of Christ on the cross. A wound is visible on his open, right hand suggesting a stigmata, or open wound that resembles Christ's woundedness. These prisoners are not Christian martyrs, however; they are fearful of the torture and death that is about to happen to them. A church building is visible in the background, but it is in darkness both compositionally and in the minds of those awaiting certain death." She suggests both the Spanish rebels and their executioners "are imprisoned by what they think is their duty to the modern nation state – to save and defend Spain, or to serve France and its brutal expansionist policy."

## Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.