

BLESSINGS TO THE CHURCH INVOLVED IN JAIL-PRISON MINISTRIES

By Buck Griffith

Fear has amazing power. It has the ability to hold us hostage. It can prevent us from even “trying” to do things – especially if we have never tried to do them before. Individual Christians and churches across the nation are overcoming the fear of jail and prison ministry involvement in rapidly growing numbers. Those involved report such wonderful blessings that others are being encouraged to get started as well.

First, let me give you a little background on this subject. As recently as 1978 we could only locate 24 churches of Christ and 110 individual Christians involved in jail-prison ministry. By 1986, the numbers had grown to 280 churches and 375 individuals. By 2000, it reached 603 congregations and 1,257 individuals. The most recent totals show 963 churches and 2,158 individuals are involved today. Reports reflect over 10,000 baptisms each year in the USA as a result of such efforts. It is not an exaggeration to say that jail-prison ministries represent the fastest growing programs and most successful evangelistically. So, more specifically, what blessings have been experienced most often by churches that have overcome their fears and have become involved?

Satisfaction

The Apostle John writes . . . “This is love: that we walk in obedience to his (*God’s*) commands” (II John 6). The Lord has issued our *marching orders* (Mark 16:15). Our assigned “territory” is worldwide. As long as jails and prisons exist, souls in them need the saving message. Satan seeks to hide precious souls from the light. God’s only legs to reach them are our own. We are His light in a dark world – commissioned to seek and save the lost. When and if we visit the least in prison, we are ministering to Jesus (Matthew 25:44-45). The majority of church members feel fairly well about their response to the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and strangers. After all, they bring items to the church’s old clothes room and food pantry. They may not actually “touch” those in need but are good at hand-washing. But, what about the verse . . . “I was in *prison* and you visited me not”? I know a few Christians who have actually read these verses and *obeyed*.

Church on a Hill

The church involved in this outreach will stand out *without special effort* – like a city on a hill (Matthew 5:14-16). No trumpet needed - obedience shouts loudly. No ads need to be placed. You don’t pay for this kind of advertising. People all over town know about the church that cares for troubled souls. Most people, places and even their home churches gave up on them years ago. You really do believe in *the God of Second Chances!* Such a congregation becomes known as The Place to go if you are less than perfect (or if someone in your family has made tragic mistakes). *Self-righteous* folks and organizations in other places will refer suffering souls to your place. “Your” place ought

to be the kind of place that Jesus would “own” if He were to make a modern-day *house call*.

Member Involvement

Although there is one “body” – it consists of *many* members (I Corinthians 12:12). It never fails but *some* members are drawn to jail-prison ministries who have basically *never* found their niche in any other aspect of the Lord’s work. And, there are *so many* different ways in which to involve them. Personally “going behind the bars” is only *one* method. I’ll never forget an elder’s wife who had become a Bible correspondence grader. She was overwhelmed to have students asking for her assistance in putting the Lord on in baptism. This lady was in her seventies and said, “*For the first time in my life, I feel like I have played a major role in leading a lost soul to Christ!*” One of our men (Jerry) helps put our portable baptistries together. They are then shipped all over the world. I have heard of 1,000 prisoners being baptized each year in *one* baptistry. Still, nothing was more rewarding to Jerry than hearing of the use of one of these units to baptize a man at his home recently who is dying of cancer.

Forgiveness Practiced

Jail-prison ministries give the church lots of opportunities to “practice” *forgiveness*. The Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:12) urges us to forgive us as we forgive others. In fact, we cannot be forgiven without it! Most church members struggle with this instruction. We enjoy talking about the failings of others. One of our young men sinned publicly and responded the very next Sunday to ask for forgiveness and rededicate his life to Christ. One lady in the foyer after services was overheard saying with a hint of regret: “Well, I guess this means we *have to* stop talking about what he did?”

After being involved in this ministry for a little while, one member remarked: “It’s easier now to forgive Sister Jones after her repenting and confessing her sin of *gossip*. After all, last week we forgave two murderers and a rapist!” We frequently announce the baptisms of men and women whose crimes are well known.

Generosity

God loves *cheerful* givers (II Corinthians 9:7). There is something about jail-prison evangelism that is highly motivational. “I have been searching for a ministry that seeks to help others without anticipation of any *return* on the investment” is a comment repeatedly heard. People are tired of giving to churches that mostly use funds to *serve themselves*. Some congregations have three, four, five or more ministers *on staff* but seldom do you find even *one* whose primary mission is to win the lost – in jails, prisons or any other dungeon. Most of the baptisms in local churches are our own children and family members.

Please, don’t get the wrong idea. I am glad that our churches have multiple ministers serving vital needs. I rejoice to see us able to construct new facilities – Christian schools, gyms, and *more!* What bothers me most is like the spice tithing. We ought to

do these things but *not leave the other undone!*

Souls won behind bars are truly lost and most have never heard about churches of Christ. With over 7,500,000 touched in some way by the *criminal justice system* in the USA – this represents a huge and ripe mission field. It is hard to find a person today that does not have some family member involved – past, present or future. The Apostle Paul spoke of some donors who “begged” him to take their gifts (to relieve suffering Jerusalem saints). My only similar experience is folks “begging” me to take their money to win souls in jails and prisons. Afterward, they cannot seem to stop “thanking” me for giving them the opportunity to help. Wow!

Attractiveness

The early church was one that was seen constantly growing in numbers (Acts 6:7). Newcomers and first-time visitors find a unique attractiveness in congregations involved in this ministry. I call it a pleasing scent, flavor or aroma. They may or may not go on to become personally involved in this exciting mission field. But seems to be important for them to belong to and identify with a church that is known for such soul-winning efforts. These new members want to contribute to making such a congregation stronger and to a fiscal budget that includes jail-prison ministries. They have often “heard” about this *city on a hill* before relocating. They come looking for it upon arrival in the city.

Speaking of attractiveness (or how things look), it is true that successful ministries behind bars also attracts family members of offenders and prisoners when released. Though there are exceptions, most of these will not wear expensive clothing or drive late-model vehicles. All nationalities will be represented. This may be rather startling to some long-time members. In the past, we all looked pretty much alike – same nationality, wore similar clothes and cars in the parking lot were of no more than 3-4 years vintage. Unfortunately, that old church was small, aging, and dying. We drew the lines so tightly – we strangled ourselves!

Crime Prevention

I maintain that every congregation is involved in crime prevention – whether known or unknown. Crime prevention begins before a child is born and continues in the Church Nursery. It is followed by efforts of parents/teachers as children move from pre-school through high school. Many invest in fulltime youth ministers, Christian schools and ultimately – universities (with campus ministries if not a Christian university).

If a youth gets into trouble with the law along the way, the church refuses to give up on him/her. We go to the juvenile detention facility and work with probation departments and others to help win this soul back for good. However, if the youth turns 18 and gets in trouble as an adult, we still refuse to give up. So, we go to the County Jail and do whatever is necessary to reclaim this valued soul. 90% will not go to prison but are soon back in our communities. Some will be placed in restitution or alcohol-drug treatment centers. We walk with them through these trying days to better ones. Sadly, others will not “straighten up” and will go from the County Jail to a state or federal prison. But, we

refuse to give up on them and minister to them there as well. At some point they will be coming out of these institutions on supervision.

The *criminal justice system* does what it is designed to do . . . constitutionally hold persons in custody for whatever period of time society prescribes. But at some point in time, they will be released – for better or for . . . *worse!* Churches involved in jail-prison ministries are much better positioned to make the difference in whether there will be good or evil fruit. It depends on what we do to minister to these souls while locked up and how we respond when they are released. We can do what the *system* is not designed to do. The “church” is God’s plan for true and lasting reconciliation.

Is There Danger?

Yes. But, there is greater danger in NOT doing God’s Will! Yes, the church involved will be fooled by some, taken advantage of by others and embarrassed (sooner or later) by those who relapse and go back to their old ways (II Peter 2:20-22). However, this also happens in the church (sooner or later) as a result of our own who never receive a speeding ticket! It is impossible for us to so insulate ourselves so as to never experience the downside of this horrible war between good and evil. We must declare our allegiance to what is good and right. Brethren . . . jail-prison ministries is good and it is the right thing to do.

Your Choice

The choice is completely up to you. You are invited to get involved in this exciting and rewarding mission field. You are invited to begin making a positive difference. You are invited to receive a multitude of blessings! In you are interested in getting involved – as a congregation or *as an individual* – contact us or the one that shared this tract with you. We will be glad to tell you what we did (including avoidable mistakes). This will help maximize the blessings in store for you.