

Repenting for our prisons

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [September 16, 2015](#) issue



[Some rights reserved](#) by [826 PARANORMAL](#).

At the heart of what Christians believe there are two fundamental ideas: *imago Dei* and metanoia. If every human being bears the image of the Creator and is valued and loved by God, then human beings have social responsibilities to value one another. Metanoia, a Greek term often translated as “repentance,” means a complete turnaround, a change of heart and mind, a new way of thinking and being. Both ideas have huge implications for us individually, but also socially, politically, and economically.

Both concepts come into play when we decide that one of us needs to be incarcerated—removed from the community and held in secure confinement. While we give mental and verbal assent to these two Christian concepts, we do our actual living in the world very differently. This includes our decision making on issues like crime and punishment.

Two resources recently stirred up my thinking. One is Jeanne Bishop’s book, *Change of Heart* (see [“The path of forgiveness”](#)). Bishop questioned the justice of locking up

her sister's killer for life without parole, observing that it's a Christian duty to make good on our promise to forgive as we have been forgiven. (See also Steve Thorngate's article ["Death without killing."](#))

Do heinous crimes negate those moral responsibilities? Most of us, I think, compromise in the interests of what we consider reality: some criminal acts are so evil that the perpetrator should be locked up for life without any hope of release. I have always been comfortable favoring life without parole instead of capital punishment.

But the criminal justice system in our country is broken. Our culture has resolved the debate about whether the purpose of incarceration is punishment or rehabilitation with a widespread and politically popular determination to get tough on crime. The result? The United States incarcerates more of its citizens than any other country in the world.

A second resource is a paper that my son Andrew wrote as part of his master's degree work. In "Mass Incarceration as a Trap: Challenges to Re-entry for Released Inmates," he observes that mass incarceration has happened fairly quickly. In 1972, 161 people out of 100,000 were incarcerated in America. Then we declared war on drugs, and by 2007 the incarceration rate in our country had jumped to 767 out of 100,000.

Social science identifies several causes for this change: tougher sentencing, incarceration for minor drug offenses, and worsening conditions in inner cities. The mammoth loss of urban manufacturing jobs and resultant middle-class flight has left what one sociologist calls "pockets of severe and concentrated poverty." At the same time, mass incarceration of African-American males has further disrupted inner city life.

The National Research Council says that the current criminal justice system advances social control at the expense of social justice. In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander argues that the shift to more punitive measures is simply the latest phase in the control of African Americans and is fueled by a growing prison-industrial and criminal justice complex.

Imprisonment in this country is long on punishment and shamefully short on rehabilitation. Inmates are released from prison in Illinois with a pair of prison sweatpants, \$10, and a one-way bus ticket. Many have nowhere to go. They often

slip easily into homelessness and crime and end up back in prison.

There are 2 million Americans in jail. Not many are receiving services that might be described as rehabilitative. The National Alliance for Mental Health estimates that 400,000 of those prisoners are dealing with significant mental health issues. Here in Chicago, Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart, who oversees the massive Cook County Jail, says he thinks of the jail as the largest mental health facility in the country.

If there's a bright side to this grim picture, it's a growing bipartisan consensus that the system is both a moral failure and a fiscal disaster. Finally we are understanding that politicians who prey on fear and trumpet their promise to get tough on crime in order to get elected were not only wrong but have created a shameful national tragedy. We need political honesty and courage, which is to say, political metanoia.