

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE CHRISTIAN CONVICT

The convict who receives Christ as his personal Savior and leads a Christian life behind bars is a changed man indeed. Although still weak and sinful, he ordinarily shows marked improvement in his life and attitude. He begins to clean up his language and it becomes different from the rest of the prisoners. He tries to accept the circumstances under which he is living. He learns to accept his incarceration and is content in spite of his circumstances. While all of his spiritual, personal and legal problems are not solved by any means, he is “a new creature” in the Lord. There is nothing that will make prison life more bearable than the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and regular association with fellow Christians in the prison environment. This is the real key to surviving the prison experience. The Christian convict radiates Christ Jesus and identifies with Him.

In any prison there are factions or interest groups that cater to each other. They are the prison peer groups or inmate organizations allowed within the prison walls. Athletes, motorcycle enthusiasts, culture groups, singers, musicians, chess players, painters and scholars all seek each other out and associate or organize. The Christian also has his own peer group of other Christians that he associates with and they gather for the authorized Christian church services or Bible studies inside the prison wall. They sometimes get a reputation for getting out of jail faster than the other inmates or “riding religion out of the prison.” This is not really true except that Christians have more reason and motive for not doing the things that get them in trouble in the prison (like drugs or violence).

Christians acquire less “write-ups,” demerits or derogatory prison records that prevent them from becoming eligible for Department of Corrections programs, such as transfer to a halfway house or minimum-security unit. Often they actually leave the main prison or close custody units and cell blocks before other men with the same sentence because they simply don’t mess up and break the rules. Once a man “gets religion,” as the non-Christian convicts say, even the guards and staff can tell the difference. One tough prison warden was overheard to say, “I don’t know what they (the Christians) have got, but whatever it is, we need more of it.”

The inmate who knows Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord attends church and Bible study. In work units or prisons with inmate jobs available, the Christian convict may apply for an 8 to 5 job that allows him to attend *all* the scheduled off-hours church services possible. The author did this during his nine month sentence at Minnesota State Prison. The Christian inmate needs the fellowship with other believers. He should look for opportunities to testify and witness and as much as possible radiate the peace he has in his Lord as he keeps the disciplined routine of the prison schedule.

The Christian inmate may prepare himself for release someday (even if it is many years away) by regular physical exercise and daily Bible study. He can pray and read his Bible during the prison counts or lockups as he uses his day to the best advantage. This is how the Christian convict spends his time when he is not working on his prison job or attending church services. He may write letters to Christian friends outside the wall. He can always enroll in a Bible study course, either inside the prison or by mail. He may also work part time or full time for the chaplain or as an outside prison volunteer. Burying himself in Christian activities prepares his mind and body for eventual release, and helps him serve his sentence. He “does his own time” in prison as required by the inmate code. When the lockup or prison shakedown inspections come, he prays. He reads. He talks to his “celly” (cell mate) who may or may not be a Christian and he prepares himself for his final day in prison; his day of release.

Satan still is a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, and he has some successes with inmates who confess Christ. Prison walls do not change the fact that there is weak faith and misguided faith and lost faith. But the Christian inmate can be a beautiful man who is worth all the evangelistic effort we put into the prison ministry to reach him.

The author knew a Christian prison volunteer in Missouri who told outsiders that he had more Christian friends inside the wall of a big prison than he had on the outside, and he really meant it. He was going into the prison two nights a week to minister and testify and he was associating with some of God's finest people in one of America's big penitentiaries. His friends inside the wall were some of our nation's finest Christians and he was enjoying their fellowship.

If you have never been in a big prison to meet good Christian inmates, you are missing an opportunity to fellowship. Go into prison and meet them. You will be surprised. The sad part of the penal system is that a sincere Christian will probably never commit another crime and they represent no further threat to society; but they may have many years of prison time to serve for something they did before they became a Christian.

Is it safe to be a Christian in prison and profess your faith in Jesus Christ? Oh! Yes! It is the only way to be in prison, if you must be there at all. Christians in jail universally feel that they have a "shield of protection" as they praise God and testify to His holy name. Christian inmates tell one story after another about experiences they have had and how they personally have been protected and uplifted in a difficult prison situation. Prisons are dangerous places indeed because some unstable men reside there. But Christians seem to always come through their prison experience unharmed because of the unique protection that our Lord provides. Christians need not fear the danger and uncertainty of prisons either as a convict or an outsider going in to minister, because our God will protect His people. The author can personally testify to this marvelous and wonderful truth. Let us praise His holy name.