

“‘A Culture of Savage Punishment: The Shame of the Church’, or, ‘Why Christians Have Mostly Washed their Hands of the Politics of Penal Justice’”

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Except for sporadic prison ministries offering chaplaincy services to inmates and the reform attempts of a small religiously-based movement to make restorative justice the guiding ethos for the US penal system, the American Christian church is largely silent on crime and punishment. This paper will offer some theological—and by extension, political—observations on this silence. It will suggest that it is symptomatic of a deeper problem, one perhaps similar to that spoken of the church by Dietrich Bonhoeffer from a Nazi prison, when he says, “One may ask whether there have ever before in human history been people with so little ground under their feet.” Modern, western Christians have little ground under their feet concerning the meaning and purpose of punishment and the prison. This problem is both ecclesiological and eschatological in nature. It is therefore political as well, as will be shown. This paper will suggest that the church is silent because it lacks a political response to the modern form of what was once a theologically-grounded social practice: punishment. In doing so, it will trace the practice of punishment to its theological/political origins and back again to its centrality in the politics of the modern liberal state. It will make a connection between the savage conditions of the penal system delivered along race and class lines and the failed eschatological imagination of the Christianity of modern liberalism.

Discipline: Religion