Review


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Christopher Marshall’s book is one volume in a larger ecumenical series entitled “Studies in Peace and Scripture,” a project sponsored by the Institute of Mennonite Studies. Marshall’s contribution “survey[s] a broad range of New Testament texts pertinent to the subject of crime and punishment in order to ascertain the extent to which they reflect what might be called a vision of restorative justice.” Indeed, through careful textual analysis and mature theological reflection, he discovers that “the first Christians experienced in Christ and lived out in their faith communities an understanding of justice as a power that heals, restores, and reconciles rather than hurts, punishes, and kills” (pp. 32-33). This reality, he argues, ought to shape a Christian contribution to the contemporary debate on criminal justice.

Marshall first explores the way in which the Apostle Paul and the writers of the canonical gospels understood God’s justice. Paul, he argues, developed his notion of God’s justice within the context of a carefully articulated theology of the atonement. In the death of Jesus Christ, Paul understood God’s justice as an occasion of reconciliation and restoration, not as one substitutionary punishment. Moreover, Marshall continues, the gospel writers portray Jesus as a practitioner of forgiveness and non-retaliation, demanding the same from those who would follow him. If any criminal justice system is to reflect the justice of God, then these values—reconciliation, forgiveness, and non-retaliation—ought to stand as the central concerns of that system.

However, these values do not exclude the necessity of punishment for wrongdoing, according to Marshall. Although he admits that the rehabilitation, deterrence, and retributive models of punishment all find limited sanction in the New Testament, Marshall asserts that none rings true to the central values of Christian faith that he has already identified. In place of these models, Marshall advocates what he calls “restorative punishment.” According to this alternative, punishment functions as an opportunity for an offender to own responsibility for his or her action and an invitation to reformation and restoration.

In an effort to quantify this notion of restorative punishment, Marshall then surveys New Testament texts dealing with both human and divine punishment: civil punishment, church discipline, and eschatological judgment. In none of these instances is divine or human punishment understood in the retributive sense. He thus concludes that “the purpose of [New Testament] punishment is ultimately reparative or redemptive in design,” a design that is both “the hallmark of God’s justice and . . . God’s final word in history” (p. 199). Because of this, Marshall is then able to argue effectively against capital punishment as a distinctively Christian response to any crime.

A meditation on the meaning of forgiveness in Christian faith marks the conclusion of Marshall’s study. He defines forgiveness as a dynamic process in which a victim does not seek reparation from his or her offender but freely provides a release for both parties and cultivates an opportunity for reconcilia-
tion between them. This definition of forgiveness can stand as an ideal in a reformed system of criminal justice, and so-called Restorative Justice is a principal example. Indeed, Marshall asserts in closing that, like the New Testament vision of justice, Restorative Justice does not diminish the reality of evil, deny the culpability of those who commit crime, or minimize the pain of those who suffer; but it does look beyond retribution toward the defeat of evil, the healing of victims, repentance, forgiveness, the restoration of peace, and the renewal of hope for all involved.

Marshall's book is admirable for at least the following: his penetrating textual analysis, the maturity of his theological reflection, and the solidness of the foundation that he lays upon which a distinctively Christian program of criminal justice reform may be built. These great strengths, oddly perhaps, translate into the book's only weakness: it remains a study for theological insiders. Marshall recognizes at the outset some of the difficulties that theologians face in taking their distinctively Christian discourse into the public arena. His own book is an excellent case in point. Professional Christian theologians and ethicists, along with theologically articulate laypersons will garner a great deal from Marshall's study. But the task of "translating" his insights into a discourse that will be intelligible to a wider public—much less into practical public policies—will be left to someone else.

Nonetheless, Marshall's book is an essential contribution to the debate over the ethics of criminal justice systems in societies whose values are defined by the Judeo-Christian tradition. I recommend his work without reservation to those who are concerned about such matters.

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Understanding the complexities of religious conflict is as important today as ever. Since the 1970s, the United States has witnessed a dramatic increase in religious pluralism, largely due to immigration from Asian and African countries, and the mass proliferation of new religious movements. Although millennial violence is centuries old, the 1990s became an extremely intense period of millennial ferment as millennial beliefs played a major role in the tragedies of groups such the Branch Davidians, the Solar Temple, and Heaven's Gate. However, the comparative and cross-cultural collection of essays in Millennialism, Persecution, & Violence point to the fact that many of these cases could have avoided violence if law enforcement agencies and the general public were more knowledgeable of the complexities underlying millennial beliefs.