



Dominique DuBois Gilliard,
author of *Rethinking*

*Incarceration: Advocating for
Justice That Restores*

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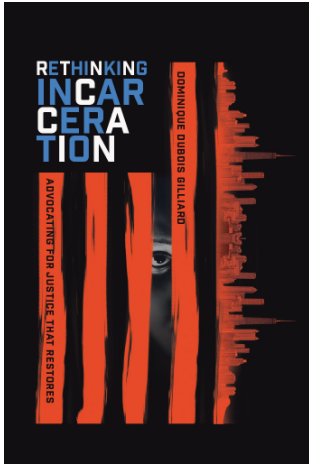
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Author of *Rethinking Incarceration*

Dominique DuBois Gilliard is the director of racial righteousness and reconciliation for the Love Mercy Do Justice (LMDJ) initiative of the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC). He serves on the board of directors for the Christian Community Development Association and Evangelicals for Justice. In 2015, he was selected as one of the ECC's "40 Under 40" leaders to watch, and the Huffington Post named him one of the "Black Christian Leaders Changing the World."

An ordained minister, Gilliard has served in pastoral ministry in Atlanta, Chicago, and Oakland. He was executive pastor of New Hope Covenant Church in Oakland, California and also served in Oakland as the associate pastor of Convergence Covenant Church. He was also the campus minister at North Park University and the racial righteousness director for ECC's ministry initiatives in the Pacific Southwest Conference.

With articles published in the *CCDA Theology Journal*, *The Covenant Quarterly*, and *Sojourners*, Gilliard has also blogged for *Christianity Today*, *Faith & Leadership*, *Red Letter Christians*, *Do Justice*, and *The Junia Project*. He earned a bachelor's degree in African American Studies from Georgia State University and a master's degree in history from East Tennessee State University, with an emphasis on race, gender, and class in the United States. He also earned an MDiv from North Park Seminary, where he served as an adjunct professor teaching Christian ethics, theology, and reconciliation.



*Rethinking Incarceration:
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Dominique Gilliard explores the history and foundation of mass incarceration, examining Christianity's role in its evolution and expansion. He assesses our nation's ethic of meritocratic justice in light of Scripture and exposes the theologies that embolden mass incarceration. Gilliard then shows how Christians can pursue justice that restores and reconciles, offering creative solutions and highlighting innovative interventions.

Advocating for Justice That Restores

Today, it is predicted that nationwide one in three black males and one in six Hispanic males will be incarcerated in their lifetime. We have come to accept this as natural. But why doesn't our discipleship inspire us to interrogate this belief?

This view of black and Hispanic men is ungodly, and we must repent. Stigmatizing entire communities is nothing new. In fact, Jesus came from Nazareth, and it was believed that nothing good could come from there. When black and brown people are universally criminalized, we all suffer. And when the church fails to name, renounce, and reshape this through biblically based discipleship, we too have blood on our hands. As Bryan Stevenson writes, "We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated. An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation."

When we dehumanize others, we become less human ourselves. In his seminal text *The Hidden Wound*, Wendell Berry says, "No man will ever be whole and dignified and free except in the knowledge that the men around him are whole and dignified and free." Taking this even further, Berry continues, "If the white man has inflicted the wound of racism upon black men, the cost has been that he would receive the mirror image of that wound into himself. As the master, or as a member of the dominant race, he has felt little compulsion to acknowledge or speak of it; the more painful it has grown the more deeply he has hidden it within himself. But the wound is there, and is a profound disorder, as great a damage in his mind as it is in his society." With this knowledge, the church must not shy away from political activism. We helped pass the laws that became the War on Drugs, and now we must mobilize to change them.

We have a responsibility to defend the dignity of society's most vulnerable, and policies such as mandatory minimums and no-knock warrants put both police and poor people at risk. These policies do not enhance our society, make our communities safer, or reflect God's love and justice. They are legislative issues that the church can, and must, work to change. We have an ethical and theological responsibility to advocate for a justice system that brings restoration to individuals and communities.

While the United States constitutes only 5 percent of the world's population, we have 25 percent of its incarcerated populace. Statistically, our nation currently has more people locked up—in jails, prisons, and detention centers—than any other country in the history of the world. We currently have more jails and prisons than degree-granting colleges and universities. In some areas of the country, there are more people living behind bars than on college campuses.

One out of every twenty-five people sentenced to the death penalty are falsely convicted. In

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BOOK EXCERPT

“Dominique DuBois Gilliard calls for a holy disruption of the systems and pipelines that imprison mostly black and brown people in the United States’ mass-incarceration-industrial complex. Rethinking Incarceration exposes the ways the church has been complicit in this injustice and invites people of faith to engage in justice that is restorative.”

– Curtiss Paul DeYoung,
CEO, Minnesota Council of Churches

many states, pregnant women are shackled to gurneys during their delivery. Thirteen states have no minimum age for prosecuting children as adults, such that children as young as eight have been tried and sentenced as adults, left vulnerable to trauma and abuse while living among adults in jails and prisons.

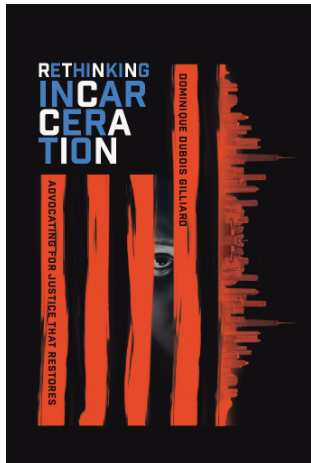
Eighty thousand inmates per day are locked in solitary confinement, where they are quarantined in a twelve by seven foot concrete cell (smaller than a standard horse stall), frequently for twenty-three hours a day, and are only allowed outdoor access and human interaction for one hour. This dehumanizing form of “incarceration” is more accurately defined as torture – a slow assault on the dignity of individuals and a strategic disintegration of their body and psyche. The Geneva Convention defined torture as

any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining a confession, punishment for an act that a person is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing a person for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity.

How did this become our reality, and who are the inmates serving time behind bars? While most theorists trace our criminal justice system’s exponential growth back to Richard Nixon’s commissioning of the drug war, this – in isolation – is an inadequate analysis. The history that bred our carceral quagmire predates Nixon’s presidency, and it is much more expansive than the War on Drugs. While the drug war is undoubtedly a primary driver of our nation’s incarceration explosion, it is inaccurate to depict it as the independent impetus of mass incarceration. The War on Drugs is only one of five pipelines currently funneling people into prison, jails, and detention centers nationwide. The other four carceral conduits are the crackdown on immigration offenses, decreased funding for mental health, private prisons and detention centers, and the school-to-prison pipeline.

Each of these pipelines is built on a legacy of racist and classist legislation that has paved the way for our present carceral epidemic. To comprehensively understand the evolution of mass incarceration, we must do something that will surprise most: begin our exploration at the time before slavery ends.

– Adapted from chapter one, “The War on Drugs”



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“Dominique gives a thorough, honest look at the history of mass incarceration, blending advocacy and theology and driving us to respond as a community of faith. This is a must-read from a leader whose passion inspires hope.”

— Leroy Barber, Voices Project, board chair of Missio Alliance, author of *Embrace*

Advocating for a Justice System That Restores and Reconciles

How did the issue of incarceration become important to you?

Dominique: The Spirit compelled me to write this book after I spent time reading, studying, and praying over the prison epistles, and passages like Matthew 25 and Acts 16. I was forced to confront a blind spot in my theology, the way my discipleship had forsaken prison ministry. As I reckoned with the implications of this and began spending time with those behind bars and re-entering society, I was haunted by the church’s eerie silence, even as mass incarceration was becoming a mainstream topic of discussion. I knew that the church has something distinctive and transformative to add to this conversation, and I wanted to help frame this critical issue theologically.

How does this book address the issues facing the criminal justice system?

Dominique: Our criminal justice system is riddled with racial and class bias. Prisons, jails, and detention centers have become places where the least of these—the poor, cognitively impaired, and society’s most vulnerable—are warehoused. Mass incarceration is a distortion of justice, it is a system of retributive punishment that dehumanizes, exploits, and disenfranchises. Scripture illuminates that biblical justice is restorative in nature. This book illustrates how restorative justice is a philosophical practice that enables Christians to practically embrace mercy as we pursue justice that reflects God’s heart. *Rethinking Incarceration* theologically frames mass incarceration, examining the church’s role in its evolution and sustainment, while advocating for an alternative, Christocentric way to engage our criminal justice system.

What is the message at the heart of *Rethinking Incarceration*?

Dominique: Mass incarceration is antithetical to the gospel. We serve a God whose final word is not retribution but restoration, who desires liberation, reconciliation, and reintegration for those behind bars. Scripture implores the church to participate in setting the captives free, spiritually liberating them, and emancipating them from a depraved system that defaces the *imago Dei*. Christians have always played a vital role in prison ministry, but over the course of time, we have lost our prophetic voice. We must regain it in this watershed moment, becoming ardent advocates for a justice system that restores and reconciles.

How is this book different than others on the topic of incarceration?

Dominique: *Rethinking Incarceration* is unique because it is written for the church, and yet it upholds a robust historical and sociological analysis. Additionally, while other books on

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mass incarceration identify the detrimental effects of the War on Drugs, this text also explores four additional pipelines feeding the prison-industrial complex: the war on immigration, mental health, private prisons, and the school-to-prison pipeline.

What do you hope to convey to readers?

Dominique:

- As followers of Christ, we must ask what our faith calls us to in this unprecedented era of mass incarceration. Collectively and individually, we must contemplate what bearing witness to the gospel in this critical moment entails.
- While most theorists trace our criminal justice system's exponential growth back to Richard Nixon's commissioning of the drug war, this—in isolation—is an inadequate analysis.
- Christians must join the freedom caravan and take part in the ongoing work of reimagining true justice.
- We can no longer wait until it is socially expedient. We are called to be a prophetic presence in the world, not merely an echo chamber that resounds once there is no longer any social risk involved in speaking up. While the church must awaken to the need for a systemic shift within our criminal justice system, we also need to realize that a shift in posture is required within the body of Christ.
- Scripture consistently reveals that restoration, not punitive punishment, is at the heart of God's justice. Biblical justice does include retribution, but not exclusively. Biblical justice cannot be solely defined by it. The more accurate description of biblical justice is restorative justice. Biblically, justice is a divine act of reparation, where breached relationships are renewed and victims, offenders, and communities are restored. Justice, therefore, is about relationships and our conduct within them.
- The great irony is that Christianity revolves around Jesus, a falsely convicted criminal who was punitively convicted, mercilessly tortured, and unjustly sentenced to death. Given this, I would think the church would understand the necessity of thinking more restoratively about criminal justice.
- Rooting our response to crime—and its subsequent punishment—in the grace first extended to us is not to be soft on crime. It means responding to crime in a Christocentric way. Crime must be addressed, and punishment needs to be issued, but as followers of Christ our response must be different from the broader world.

"An astonishing book—full of insights that draw from history, politics, social research, and Scripture. Gilliard crafts a compelling picture that links local policy and decisions and shows the impact on a national scale. This book is a thought-provoking call to the church to take a practical role in engaging with mass incarceration and its effects."

-Nikki Toyama-Szeto,
executive director,
Evangelicals for Social Action
(ESA)