

The Truth About Capital Punishment

The Bible is used and abused in the debate about capital punishment. Some think the Bible can be applied on both sides of any issue. They apparently believe the Bible is not consistent, not authoritative on any subject. What can you believe? What does the Bible really say about capital punishment?

by William H. Ellis

Both factions addressing the issue of capital punishment purport to use the Bible to prove the validity of their arguments. But, both can't be right or the Bible would be seen to contradict itself.

Some cite "eye for an eye-life for a life" justice to execute criminals. By contrast, those who support abolition of the death penalty shout, "Thou shalt not kill!" They assert it is far better to let murderers go free than to execute a single innocent person.

In fact, members of each faction slant, twist, and distort Holy Scripture in a futile attempt to bend God's Word to their own point of view. They are not seeking God's revelation of His will, they are seeking their own ways. In the face of rising crime rates, the U.S. Supreme Court allowed the states to resume executions some nineteen years ago, in 1976. Since then, more than 250 convicted criminals have been put to death under laws requiring capital punishment.

Writing for The New York Times, liberal Tom Kuntz opined concerning executions: "Will all this killing do any good? Will it deter crime? Is it cost effective? Or are we simply talking about retribution here-real Old Testament stuff?" (December 4, 1994).

Those who support the abolition of the death penalty portray the God of the Old Testament as a vengeful, hanging Judge Who delighted in the punishment and the execution of sinners. They claim His Old Testament laws which demand "life for a life" justice are primitive. Death penalties, they imagine, are archaic anachronisms, a vestige of man's evolutionary brutality, totally out of date in this modern world.

Is God Consistent?

Is that the sort of God you worship?

That is not the God your Bible describes. Through His Word, the Bible, Almighty God reveals Himself as eternally consistent in dispensing judgment. It is human beings who are not! (Read Hebrews 13:8 and Malachi 3:6.)

As a result of preconceived ideas about capital punishment, many political pundits, as well as religious leaders, condemn God's laws as recorded in the Old Testament as "unjust"- "a yoke of bondage." Many church leaders won't turn to the Bible to find what God has to say about any modern social problems. The Bible is summarily rejected.

If the leaders of the flock have no sense of direction, what can we expect? Has God changed since Old

Testament times? What does He say about capital punishment today?

Jesus-Innocent Victim

Jesus Christ was the innocent victim of capital punishment.

His execution by Roman soldiers was an ugly, brutal, degrading application of the death penalty. Neither the beating of Rodney King nor the beating of Reginald Denny in Los Angeles can be compared to the fury of the vicious beating given to Jesus Christ before He was finally nailed to the stake and left to die an agonizingly slow death.

Jesus didn't die peacefully by being put to sleep from a lethal injection while lying on a crisp white sheet draped over a hospital gurney. He gradually bled to death from injuries deliberately inflicted by a number of powerful men over many hours of violent physical abuse.

Yet, Jesus Christ was innocent of any crime!

Jesus died and rose from the dead.

Death Penalty Under the Old Covenant

Let's examine the law of God regarding the death penalty in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, and discover what God really has to say about capital punishment.

In the Old Testament we find laws dealing with the death penalty. The ancient Israelites had the authority to execute the guilty. How does that law affect Christians today?

The law which contained the death penalty for capital crimes was aptly termed the "ministration of death" by the apostle Paul (II Corinthians 3:7). Notice Paul's attitude toward the Old Testament death penalty law: "But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not steadfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory, which was to be done away; how shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious?"

The administration of the death penalty under the Old Covenant was glorious! Let's discover why!

Based On Ten Commandments

The administration of the death penalty is founded on the Ten Commandments. It is not a primitive law conceived by Moses for a community of nomadic shepherds. It is the direct revelation of Almighty God.

In Exodus 20:1-20, God spoke the Ten Commandments directly to ancient Israel. But they were terrified! They asked Moses to represent them before God (verses 18-21). Notice carefully that God continued to instruct Moses, giving him all the laws upon which the Old Covenant was to be based. God's instructions continued right through the Book of Exodus without interruption from Exodus 20:21 to Exodus 24:2.

The covenant was agreed to by the people and ratified by sacrifices and a ceremonial dinner with the elders of Israel on Mt. Sinai with God Himself (Exodus 24:9-11).

Notice what God said:

"I will give thee tables of stone (the Ten Commandments), and a law, and commandments which I have written that thou mayest teach them" (Exodus 24:12).

God gave them not only the Ten Commandments, but all of the laws, including the law of capital punishment requiring the death penalty. Although God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 18:23,32), these laws exacted the death penalty for violation of God's commands (Exodus 21:12-27). Even under the Old Covenant, the wages of sin was DEATH! (Romans 6:23.)

These were the laws which were so GLORIOUS that Moses' face shown with a "glory" spoken of by Paul (Deuteronomy 10:4 and Deuteronomy 27:1-4 compared with II Corinthians 3:7).

How Death Penalty Administered

The administration of the death penalty under God's law was not a matter of primitive personal or collective vengeance-a vendetta. There were definite codified, legal procedures, a system of judges, evidence collected and evaluated, and witnesses presented before any penalty was levied.

Exodus 21:22,23 shows that decisions which demanded a "life for a life" were in the hands of judges, men chosen from among their fellows for their integrity. These men were given a measure of God's Holy Spirit to aid them in judgment (Exodus 18:19-27). The judges were cautioned in cases of doubt to gather plenty of evidence before rendering a decision which might invoke the death penalty (Deuteronomy 19:15-21).

But, when the matter was no longer in doubt, the punishment was set by God's law, and it was swift; no further appeals were permitted. "Thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life" (verse 21).

Who had the responsibility to demand the death penalty for breaking the "glorious" code of justice God gave ancient Israel? God Himself!

God worked through the government He established in the hands of His judges (II Chronicles 19:6). He was the One ultimately responsible for the execution of the criminal (Deuteronomy 19:17).

Is the Death Penalty a Deterrent?

Modern society likes to get in God's face when they disagree with His revealed Word!

One argument used against the death penalty is that execution has no "deterrent value"-it doesn't stop crime.

Although most modern law enforcement officers have consistently and vehemently disagreed with that notion, the bleeding heart abolitionists remain adamant.

Few will admit that one clear deterrent is that the executed criminal will never be paroled, will never again commit any crime, because he is dead. Fewer still will acknowledge the fact that there is no statistical way to measure deterrence, since crimes which aren't committed can't be counted.

Yet, abolitionists believe they know better than God! They refuse to acknowledge His authority.

God Almighty created human life. He knows its full value. Yet, He established the law of capital punishment and the death penalty. Why?

Perhaps God's Word should be read again as proof positive that capital punishment is a deterrent to crime:

"So shalt thou put the evil away from among you. And those which remain shall hear and fear, and shall henceforth commit no more any such evil among you" (Deuteronomy 19:19-20).

The Whole Law

As those who believe the Bible, we must never forget that capital punishment and the death penalty were only a part of a complete code of laws, closely knit together, designed by God for a purpose. Unless the whole of God's law is practiced by a community, even its best features may become ineffective.

Notice how God referred to the entire code of law that He considered as a whole:

"Behold," God inspired Moses to write in Deuteronomy 4:5-8, "I have taught you statutes and judgments even as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do so in the land wither you go to possess it. Keep therefore and do them: For this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all of these statutes and say, surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them as the Lord our God in all things that we call upon him for? And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as this law which I set before you this day?"

No nation on earth has yet fulfilled the potential God Almighty wrote into His laws. No nation has ever achieved the pinnacle of national greatness made possible by keeping His law!

Modern nations either reject capital punishment and the death penalty completely or take the teeth out of the law through endless rounds of expensive court battles and appeals which last for years.

Richard F. Dieter, director of the Death Penalty Information Center is quoted in The New York Times (December 4, 1994):

"Complex pre-trial motions, lengthy jury selections, and expenses for expert witnesses are all likely to add to the costs in death penalty cases."

In the same biased article, under a chart headed "The Price of a Death Penalty Sentence," Times writer Anne Cronin notes: "In North Carolina, an indigent defendant in a capital trial has the right to two lawyers instead of one. More expert witnesses are required. More legal briefs are filed. After conviction, there are nine steps in the appeals process, and some can be repeated."

There is no "swift justice" in modern courts. One need only look at the examples of the trials of the Menendez brothers and of O.J. Simpson in California. There is no confidence in the integrity of elected or appointed judges who sit on the bench. There is no law of the land which can compare to the law God gave all peoples and nations (not just ancient Israel) who can read and apply Holy Scripture to their lives.

Why doesn't capital punishment deter in modern society? Because the whole of God's law is not kept.

Why Israel Failed

Ancient Israel was a theocracy as long as it submitted to God's law and His government. God ruled Israel as its King.

But your Old Testament is a sad chronicle of the repeated failure of Israel to keep God's glorious laws. Without deterrence, the result was decadence, immorality, the destruction of the family, escalating crimes of brutality, constant warfare, and finally the national captivity which inevitably followed.

It is the same path the nations of modern Israel are rushing down headlong today.

Where did ancient Israel go wrong? Why did the nation fail, given such a glorious law?

After giving Israel His law, God lamented to Moses in Deuteronomy 5:29:

"O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and their children forever!"

After the people of ancient Israel had sinned, God pleaded with them to receive a new circumcision-a circumcision of the heart-which would grant them repentance from their rebellion (Deuteronomy 10:16). But Israel remained stubborn.

The law that was so glorious was, in fact, wasted on a people who would not obey it (Jeremiah 17:9). And because of that fault of disobedience in the people, the Old Covenant was unable to bring the blessings it promised for obedience.

The Glory of the Law

Was the administration of the death penalty done away with when ancient Israel was no longer a nation?

No! The death penalty remains.

Romans 6:23 plainly reminds New Testament Christians: "The wages of sin is death!"

The law which condemned the criminal to death under the Old Covenant is still binding today. The law which demands a sinner pay with his life is so inexorable that not even Jesus Christ was an exception to it. When Jesus was made sin for us, He was required to suffer the wages of sin-the death penalty-for us.

Our sins-our crimes against God's law-required the sentence of the death penalty for each of us. Jesus paid our death penalty debt for us.

Jesus did not do away with the law of the death penalty. The law of the death penalty did away with Jesus' perfect and sinless human life in our place.

That is what grace is!

Grace is the undeserved pardon from the death penalty we earned by our criminal behavior-our sins against God's law.

The Bible is not inconsistent about the death penalty. It simply doesn't support the views of this world's politicians and bleeding heart activists who reject God's Word and His law.

Even though Jesus Christ, Himself, was completely innocent, His death for our capital crimes, our sins against God's law, is eloquent testimony to the value and the glory God places on the laws of capital

punishment.

Christ and Government Change

A Christian is a person who follows Christ, acts as Christ did, who has Jesus Christ living His life within him.

Notice what the apostle Paul wrote: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Galatians 2:20). He admonished: "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5).

What was Christ's mind, His attitude, regarding the laws of capital punishment where He was living?

Jesus lived in a land under two governments, neither of which was the government of God's Kingdom. But both had laws of capital punishment. The Jews had their own laws, their own police force, their own courts (John 18:31), and limited powers to execute criminals convicted of crimes (John 19:4-7; Acts 7:57,58). Over the provincial authorities was the power of the Roman Empire.

The Roman occupation government of Palestine was centered in the hands of Procurator Pontius Pilate. He had authority to administer the death penalty. Notice how he questioned Jesus:

"Speakest thou unto me: Knowest thou that I have the power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee?" (John 19:10).

Jesus was executed under laws which demanded the death penalty, even though His trial was illegal and He was pronounced innocent by Pilate, the judge (John 19:4).

Jesus was well aware that capital punishment was practiced by the governments under which He lived. What was His stand with regard to the death penalty? What did He tell Pilate that is a guide for Christians, if Christ is actually living within them?

"Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence" (John 18:36).

This is not God's world! Mankind has rejected God's rule and rejected His government. Satan is the god of this world (read II Corinthians 4:4 and Revelation 12:9).

Jesus Christ was the Representative of another government. He was its Messenger, and He qualified to be its King! He told Pilate:

"Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born and for this cause came I into this world" (John 18:37).

His pronouncement was a political declaration. It defines simply a Christian's relationship to the administration of the governments under which he or she may live.

Jesus did not teach active participation in the governments of this world. He did not seek political office or attempt to overthrow the government of the country in which He lived. Nor did He form committees, political action groups, or coalitions to influence government administrations in a particular direction.

While He called his disciples and servants out of this world, He also commanded them to be active in preaching the good news of God's coming government to all the world as a witness (Matthew 24:14).

A Christian's Responsibility

Even today, Christians live in the nations of this world as though they are foreigners, here as law-abiding guests of the country where they reside. They live as "ambassadors" of another government, the soon-coming, world-ruling Kingdom of God (II Corinthians 5:17-20).

A representative of another government does not mingle in the politics of the country to which he has been sent, but remains aloof from its internal strife. He does not lobby its government for social reforms, does not seek to effect political changes.

Instead, a Christian represents God's Kingdom as its servant, living a good example as a guest in the country where he has been stationed, paying taxes and obeying its laws (Mark 12:14-17). A Christian is always looking "for a city which hath foundations whose builder and maker is God" and lives in this world as though it were a "strange country" (Hebrews 11:9-11). The apostle Paul wrote Christians ought to be law-abiding citizens wherever they live.

"Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shall have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil be afraid; for he beareth not the SWORD in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to EXECUTE wrath upon him that doeth evil" (Romans 13:1-4). God Himself has allowed the administrations (ministries) of worldly governments to make laws, including death penalty laws, in their attempts to maintain the rapidly crumbling society and fragile civilization around us. If we disobey man's law, we can expect the full measure of punishment that law allows, including the sword and execution for capital crimes.

Death Penalty in the Future

Jesus Christ was executed for the sins each of us commit. His death commuted our Sentence of death.

He rose from the dead and will soon return to this earth to establish His Kingdom. That is the message He brought-the Good News that God's Kingdom will be set up on this earth. The message of God's world-ruling government is the very essence of the gospel.

Notice what your Bible reveals about Christ's return:

"And I saw heaven opened," John writes in vision in Revelation 19:11, "and behold a white horse; and He that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness doth He judge and make war!"

John reveals that this is a vision of the Word of God (verse 13), Who had been made flesh (John 1:1-14)-the resurrected Christ. He will return as the King of kings and the Lord of lords (verse 16), to rule this earth.

After the rebellious armies of mankind are subdued by Jesus Christ, this world will be ruled by the government of Almighty God. Notice the description of that coming time of peace and prosperity in Isaiah

2:2-4: "He will teach us His ways, and we will walk in His paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the Word of God from Jerusalem."

In the coming millennial utopia, God's government will bring what man's governments can't achieve. All nations will experience the blessings of obedience. The law of God will be as plentiful as the waters which cover the ocean's beds (Isaiah 11:9).

When this earth is ruled by the theocracy of God's government, no longer will little children be immolated by napalm in warfare, or gunned down in the streets of cities in random violence. No longer will homes be broken by divorce-the sins of fathers and mothers. No longer will immorality be a breeding ground for wild teenagers. No longer will the sins of parents penalize their children.

"In those days they shall no more say, the fathers have eaten a sour grape and the children's teeth are set on edge. But everyone shall die for his own iniquity" (Jeremiah 31:29,30).

The principle of capital punishment and the execution of criminals will be practiced under God's coming government. The fact is repeated often in Ezekiel 18, read the entire chapter and note especially verses 4 and 20.

Criminal Rehabilitation-Repentance

In God's government, mercy will be extended to the sinner-the criminal-who is willing to repent (verses 20-23). God has no pleasure "at all" in executing people when they can turn from their criminal behavior and live! Within God's government the possibility of commuting the death penalty and of rehabilitation of the criminal depends on individual repentance.

Still, today, even as in ancient Israel, people condemn God's righteous and glorious law as "unequal" (Ezekiel 18:29). And God answers them:

"O house of Israel, are not my ways equal? Are not your ways unequal?" What does God expect?

"Repent and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions whereby you have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit; for why will you die?,...Turn yourselves and live!" (Ezekiel 18:30-32).

The New Covenant

Israel of old failed to keep God's law and refused to repent. The first step for them-as it is for us-was to turn from breaking God's law and begin keeping it. They didn't. They rejected God's law, which would have brought the utopia they dreamed of in the promised land and with it the admiration of nations around the world.

The failure of the Old Covenant was not a failing of God or His law. It was the failure of the people to keep their part of the covenant-their failure to keep God's law. They continued to break the law (Jeremiah 31:31,32). Notice, now, the promise of the New Covenant:

"This shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and WRITE IT IN THEIR HEARTS" (verse 33).

Under the New Covenant, when individuals repent they will receive that circumcision of the heart which

ancient Israel rejected and Paul revealed is performed by God's Holy Spirit (Romans 2:28,29).

The indwelling power of God's Spirit can make it possible for God's law to be written in the minds and hearts of human beings. It can enable mankind to individually overcome sin!

Under the New Covenant administration of the Spirit, the laws of capital punishment and the death penalty will be rendered unnecessary. There is no need to punish crimes when no crimes are committed. God's indwelling Spirit helps repentant people obey God's laws, not break them.

As Christians now and in the future obey God's laws, overcoming sin in their lives by the power of His Spirit, there will be no need for punishment for lawbreaking.

As the apostle Paul wrote, the administration of the law which did away with the sinner (by execution) was glorious. But the administration of God's Spirit which does away with the record of sin and suspends the death sentence is more glorious! Read again and really understand what Paul wrote in II Corinthians 3:7!

God Consistent on Death Penalty

The good news of God's coming Kingdom brings with it the good news that under God's government mankind will begin to be able to obey God's law! Christians today have already submitted to His glorious law, and are already under the new administration of the Spirit. They are participating in the New Covenant, having God's law written in their hearts and minds after repentance. They are obeying God's law in their everyday lives and overcoming sin by the power of God's Spirit.

In the future the theocracy of God's Kingdom will be set up on this earth and all nations will come under its authority. It will teach and practice the laws of capital punishment and enforce the death penalty upon law breakers until human sin is done away with forever.

The Bible speaks consistently from Genesis to Revelation.

(If you have not already received our free booklet, Capital Punishment-A Christian Dilemma, write for your copy today!)

info@cgi.org

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