

The Death Penalty?

by Heath Rogers

The death penalty is a very controversial issue in our society. Every time there is an execution, we can expect the typical arguments to be made by those on both sides of this issue. What disappoints me are the number of people who identify themselves as Christians who speak out *against* the death penalty from a "Biblical" point of view. They condemn the action by claiming that it violates the "Golden Rule," fails to show true love, opposes the true spirit of Christ, and that it is murder and thus it is a sin. Such arguments may sound scriptural, but are they true? What does the Bible say about the death penalty?

The Old Testament. There were a number of crimes that were punishable by death under the Law of Moses. Among them were idolatry (Deut. 13:6-10), witchcraft and sorcery (Ex. 22:18), blasphemy (Lev. 24:11-23), disobedience to parents (Deut. 21:18-21), adultery (Lev. 20:10), homosexuality (Lev. 20:13), murder (Ex. 21:12-14) and kidnapping (Ex. 21:16).

However, the death penalty for murder actually predates the Law of Moses. After the Flood, when Noah and his family were leaving the ark, God made a covenant with man. Included were the following instructions about murder: "Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a reckoning; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of man. From the hand of every man's brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man" (Gen. 9:5-6).

Why is the death penalty a suitable punishment for murder? The reason is because of the sacredness of human life. No man can give life - only God. Therefore, life is to be respected by man. The taking of a human life is the killing of something that was made both by God in the image of God (Gen. 1:26). No one has the right to destroy what is made in the image of God without suffering the consequences.

The Purpose of Government. Civil authorities are to ensure the peace by punishing lawbreakers (1 Peter 2:13-14). They are authorized by God to "bear the sword" and to "execute wrath" on those who practice evil (Rom. 13:1-4). Government is not to rehabilitate, recreate, educate or entertain criminals. Criminals are to be punished, and the New Testament certainly authorizes civil authorities to use the death penalty in the case of murder.

The Purpose of Punishment. Why is punishment rendered? It is not for the benefit of the criminal. Nor is it for the victims or their survivors. The purpose of punishment is to deter future criminals and to ensure the peace and safety of law-abiding citizens. "Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil" (Eccl. 8:11). If evil people know that they will not be punished, or that their punishment will be light, then there is nothing keeping them from committing crimes against us and our loved ones.

Someone may still protest the death penalty on the grounds that it appears to violate the love of Christ. I have heard one say that they oppose the death penalty because they couldn't see Jesus executing anyone. What Jesus are you looking at? On the Last Day, Jesus will be casting people into Hell (Matt. 7:21-23, 25:41-46). Which is worse (Matt. 10:28)?

What should a Christian's stance be on the death penalty? According to the Bible, the execution of a murderer is not "murder" – it is justice. The Bible allows the death penalty in the case of murder.

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