

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed."

Genesis 9:6a

INTRODUCTION

"There is no reason for a civilized society to kill its own citizens and call it justice." So said Freddie Nixon, chairman of the Arkansas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, as he and about 20 members of the American Civil Liberties Union protested the executions this week (1/8/97) of three convicted murderers (Kirt Wainwright, Paul Ruiz, and Earl Van Denton).

Capital punishment has been among the most controversial ethical issues in society. Strong disagreement exists even among sincere Bible students; and almost **everyone** appeals to Scripture to support their position. It is incumbent upon Christians, as the moral conscience of society, not only to **know**, but also to actively **advocate** God's will in this crucial matter, whether it be at the ballot box, through legislation, or in the slim chance that we would ever serve on a jury in a capital case.

What **does** the Bible say about capital punishment?

I. BIBLICAL TEACHING

A. Scriptures

1. Genesis 9:5,6 — *"And surely I will require your lifeblood; from every beast I will require it. And from every man, from 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."*
2. The Law of Moses stipulated the principle of retributive justice thusly: "eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise, life for life, etc." showing no pity. (cf. Ex. 21:23-25; Lev. 24:19, 20; Deut. 19:21). Leviticus 24:21 says, "Whoever kills a man must be put to death."

B. Applicable Offenses

1. Murder (Ex. 21:12-14; Num. 35:30)
2. Kidnapping (Ex. 21:16; Deut. 24:7)
3. Adultery (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22-24)
4. Incest (Lev. 20:11, 12, 14)
5. Homosexual acts (Lev. 20:13)
6. Striking or cursing parents (Ex. 21:15, 17)
7. Rebelling against parents (Deut. 21:18-21)
8. Witchcraft and spiritism (Ex. 22:18; Lev. 20:27)
9. Cursing God (Lev. 24:10-16)
10. Trying to lead people to serve false gods (Deut. 13:1-11; 18:20)

C. Divine Examples

1. Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24)
2. Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:11-11)

II. MAN'S ROLE

A. Objections to man's involvement

1. "Only God gives life; only God is authorized to take it."
2. "God said, 'Vengeance is **mine**' (Rom. 12:19)."
3. These ignore the principle of *delegated authority*.

B. Government as God's minister / agent in punishing lawbreakers

1. Rom. 13:4; 1 Pet. 2:14
2. **"By man"** is the murderer's blood to be shed (Gen. 9:6).

C. Never personal revenge

1. Jesus' teachings about loving your neighbor and turning the other cheek instead of following the "eye for eye" principle do not negate *governmental retribution* but rather *personal revenge*.
2. Those who appeal to Rom. 12:19 to apply to the final judgment alone, thereby negating the

appropriateness of capital punishment need to read the entire context into chapter 13 (esp. v. 4), where Paul says the civil ruler is “an **avenger** who brings **wrath** upon the one who practices evil.”

III. THE PURPOSE OF PUNISHMENT

- A. Incorrect view — that punishment should be applied for humane or merciful reasons only.
 - 1. for rehabilitation
 - 2. deterrence from further crime
- B. Sanctity of life
 - 1. That man is created in God's image is the reason given in Gen. 9:6 to justify capital punishment.
 - 2. Not a violation of the sixth commandment
 - a. It actually says, “Thou shalt do no murder.”
 - b. All killing is not herein condemned, as evidenced by the many times God ordained the sacrificing of animals and the slaughter of peoples.
 - 3. The death penalty is consistent with the sanctity of human life. The exacting of this penalty for murder highlights the extreme value God places upon human life.
- C. Retribution
 - 1. Punishment should be exacted simply because the criminal deserves it.
 - 2. The function of law (government) is justice.
 - 3. That retribution is the basic (divinely ordained) reason for punishment is seen most vividly in the fact of Hell.
- D. Deterrent
 - 1. If the death penalty does not deter crime, then other penalties for violating laws would not deter crime either.
 - 2. The year 1963 is distinguished by two facts: the first year in U.S. history in which executions of criminals did not occur and a crime rate higher than any previous year.
 - 3. Britain was the first major nation to abolish the death penalty. In the two year following, murder cases jumped 11%!
 - 4. I have in my files statements from five criminals, all of whom testified that their fear of the death penalty was the factor that prevented them from murdering the victims of their crimes.
 - 5. The swift and certain punishment of evildoers does deter others from committing crime. This element of fear is the motivation employed by government to preserve peace. This is according to God's design for law and the just penalty for lawbreakers. Deuteronomy 21:18 says,
“If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother,...they shall seize him and deliver him over to the elders of the city...Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death; so shall you remove the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear of it and fear.”

See also Deut. 17:12, 13; 19:15-21.

IV. COMMON OBJECTIONS REFUTED

- A. Some argue that the death penalty is not an effective deterrent.
 - 1. Statistical studies can never be conclusive
 - 2. Since retribution is the primary purpose of punishment, it should still be applied even if it did not deter further crime.
 - 3. To whatever degree it is ineffective is a reflection upon our flawed justice system rather than upon the propriety of the punishment. (Ecclesiastes 8:11 applies here.)
- B. Many would argue that the new dispensation ushered in when Jesus came was accompanied by a new system of ethics that overrode the previous ethic, thereby making all killing wrong.
 - 1. Based upon passages already addressed: Matt. 5:38-48; John 13:34, 35; Rom. 12:17-21
 - 2. Jesus' main purpose in coming was NOT revelation, but redemption; **not to reveal a new ethic**, something God could have accomplished another way, but to *redeem lost souls*.
 - 3. To make capital punishment a strictly Old Testament practice that was overturned when

Jesus came ignores the fact that the apostles affirmed the role of capital punishment in this new dispensation, as evidenced by Paul's statement in Acts 25:11 wherein he submits himself to that punishment if it could be demonstrated that he had committed a capital offense.

C. "Capital punishment rules out opportunity for repentance."

1. The capital offender forfeits his right to further opportunity.
2. This did not preclude God's wrath upon the likes of Sodom and Gomorrah.

D. "Murderers are sick people who should be *cured*, not *killed*."

1. All sinners are spiritually sick (Jer. 17:9); sin is the result of a sick heart.
2. The sinner is not hereby relieved of his moral responsibility nor from legal liability (e.g., punishment). Otherwise there would be no Hell.

CONCLUSION

Capital punishment is not inherently wrong, for God has clearly ordained it, given guidelines for its application, and even practiced it. It is consistent with God's nature of holiness, which demands just recompense. "Our God is a consuming fire" (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29) It is consistent with the sanctity God gives to human life. It is consistent with the Law He gave to Moses.

Civil government is the divinely authorized agent in its, shall we say, execution. Capital punishment is not a violation of God's condemnation of personal revenge, but is rather a means of honoring God's vengeance.

Capital punishment satisfies all the biblically stated purposes for punishment: 1) justice, 2) retribution, and 3) deterrent.

Since there can be no doubt that God has both ordained and sanctioned capital punishment, the question that remains is: Are we violating His will if we protest its implementation?