

IS CAPITAL PUNISHMENT SANCTIONED IN THE NT?

By Denver Cheddie

Christians and people in general are divided over the issue of the death penalty. Some believe it is barbaric and utilizes violence in an attempt to discourage violent crimes. Others believe it is consistent with the Biblical teaching, and failure to execute it would be a compromise of justice. We will examine what the Bible teaches concerning capital punishment.

In the OT, the death penalty was ordained by God for various crimes including murder, adultery, homosexuality, breaking the Sabbath, and witchcraft. Even rebellious children were punished by death (Deut. 21:18-21). Much of this is still practiced in Islamic nations. In the West, only murder and treason are punishable by death. It helps to ask why exactly God demanded such heavy judgment in the OT, even for seemingly trivial matters such as picking up sticks on the Sabbath day (Num. 15:32-26).

One principle behind the death penalty in the OT was “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21). This was the justification for the execution of murderers. However this could not possibly be the reason why gays or Sabbath breakers were killed. There was more to it than that. God demanded death for many Law breakers **to remove evil from Israel** (Deut. 17:7,12; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21,22,24; 24:7; Judges. 20:13). A little leaven leavens the lump and His holiness demanded that there be purity among His people. So just about every lack of conformity had to be dealt with immediately – either in the form of ritual cleansing or

death. The primary purpose of the death penalty was to remove the curse from society.

Are these principles still to govern our way of life today? In the light of Matt. 5:38-42, revenge should not be our motivation to kill murderers. I am aware that this is more easily said than done, but God would not accept such an explanation on the Day of Judgment. Secondly would applying the death penalty to murderers today remove the curse from society? To do that just about everyone would need to be executed since all have sinned. But God had a better idea. He sent His Son to become a curse for us (Gal. 3:13). The death penalty is no longer needed to remove the curse. I suggest that preachers stop their futile crusades for or against political issues and get back to their job of preaching the gospel. We are the last people to demand justice. We should be preaching the mercy of God.

Death Penalty proponents will have a serious problem with John 8:1-12*. Here Jesus offered forgiveness to a woman who was repentant of her adultery. He did not enforce the OT law upon her. Of course she was repentant. How should we deal with convicts who are not repentant?

I believe that the NT does not endorse or condemn the death penalty. It leaves it up to any individual government to decide (Rom. 13:4). The issue is not a biblical one, but rather a social one. Is capital punishment really a deterrent to crime? Many would argue that it is not, because executions have taken place in the West, seemingly to no avail. But the West has yet to see a consistent application of the death penalty. On the other hand, in

Islamic nations where the death penalty is consistently applied, there does seem to be a lower crime rate. I would not for one minute condone all the transpires in those countries, but I am in favor of the death penalty for murderers – not for revenge but for the protection of other citizens. Normally the tendency is for such men to become worse (2 Tim. 3:13). If they get away with it once, they will tend to think they can get away again. It would also send a message to other potential murderers. Whether or not they receive that message is something else. So what if they're repentant? I say, hang them anyway, they would go to heaven.

* There is a dispute over the authenticity of these verses. Some doubt whether it was originally part of the Gospel of John or the Bible. They believe it found its way into the scriptures through oral tradition i.e. it was a story commonly told of an incident in Jesus' life. Whether it was originally part of the scriptures or not, very few would deny that this event is very consistent with Jesus' ministry. The bottom line is that whether or not this story was actually part of the original Gospel of John, few would deny that it actually took place.

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