

Capital Punishment

Trent Kennedy

In the face of 21st century moral and ethical issues, the Lord's church must still lean upon the inspired Word of God and look to Divine wisdom to answer these questions, find God's perspective on these issues, and see how we should treat those with whom we disagree. One of the topics of political, cultural, and spiritual significance is capital punishment. Does the government have the right to administer the death penalty? Can a Christian support ending the life of another human being? Must the Christian support it in every circumstance? Can a Christian be opposed to it? These are not questions merely for our feelings nor for our own subjective truth nor for the political party leaders that we support; they are questions which must first and foremost be considered from the Bible; and then readily, humbly, consistently, thoughtfully, and carefully be applied to our lives.

Our family has lived in the Asian city/nation of Singapore for just a few months, and one thing that everyone knows about Singapore is that they are serious about law and order. In fact, up until a few years ago you could be prosecuted for chewing gum or spitting on the sidewalk. You do not want to paint graffiti (or at least not get caught) without permission. Even certain drug crimes carry a significant penalty, up to death. In Singapore, public execution is still something that citizens can see today. This large city (about 6 million people) has one of the lowest crime rates in the world. Their stiff punishments may not be the only reason crime is so low, but consider the wisdom of the wise: "Because 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" (Ecc. 8:11). Solomon is observing that many people continue to violate the law because they are not punished immediately. While living on earth, civil governments would find Biblical wisdom to punish quickly in accord with the crime. Many people live their lives without considering the fact that all will be held accountable for their (our) actions upon this earth. When God chose to punish sin immediately, on the spot, it had quite a lasting affect on those who stood near by (cf. Lev. 10, Acts 5). Now, God will wait to punish or reward our lives on earth until our time on earth has ceased. But, God has reserved the role for punishing evildoers to the civil authorities, and this is where we must consider the topic of capital punishment.

The observation that Solomon made in Ecclesiastes 8:11 is true in Singapore and other places even today. People are deterred by punishment that is rendered quickly. If others see the quick and efficient punishment of horrendous offenses of law, they will be much less likely to commit the same crimes. Academic research by Dezhbakhsh, Rubin, and Shepherd states as follows, "Our results suggest that capital punishment has a strong deterrent effect; each execution results, on average, in 18 fewer murders..."¹ While this research may be a little old now, so is the book of Ecclesiastes. Both are still relevant. How exactly does God view capital punishment? In the era of the patriarchs, God said, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man," (Gen. 9:6). Under the Mosaic Covenant God said, "And if a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be put to death..." (Deut. 21:22). So many people today wring their hands at God's wisdom, which is actually in accord with the 8th

¹(http://www.cjlf.org/death_penalty/DezRubShepDeterFinal.pdf).

Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. In Exodus 21:24ff (cf. Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21), God gives the rule that the punishment should fit the crime and not be in extravagance. If you are wronged an eye or a tooth, you are not allowed to take a life. But, if you are wronged a life, then that is punishable by the loss of life (cf. Deut. 19 and the role of the avenger of blood).

What about under the New Covenant, the one we live under today? Has God changed? Here are some thoughts for consideration: 1) Jesus did not deny Pilate's authority to execute him (John 19:10); 2) Paul encouraged his own execution under worthy offenses, (Acts 25:1-12); 3) God gave civil government the authority to use the death penalty (Rom. 13:1-7, 1 Tim. 2:9, 1 Pet. 2:14). When commenting on the authority of government to wage (just) war and carry out (just) capital punishment, a dear brother used to say "you don't use a sword to butter bread!" The resounding answer from scripture is that capital punishment is given to civil governments by the very hand of God and should be supported as the right of the government (when justly used) by all Christians.

In this support though Christians must pause to check their consistency. Would (should) Christians support the use of the death penalty in every case? Would we support the death penalty of 1 million people in Europe who were found guilty of being Jewish? Would we support a foreign government administering the death penalty for the crime of journalism? You see, it is actually unchristian to support the death penalty in every circumstance. The punishment must fit the crime. In order for life to be taken, something given by God and owned exclusively by Him, the crime must be such that life is taken, ruined, or discarded. Because this is a serious matter, the offense must be serious, of grave consequence from a civil perspective.

Another point of consistency that Christians in the U.S. must consider: must we support a death penalty that is much more likely to be given to people who have darker skin than those who have lighter skin? What about a death penalty that is more readily administered to those who have less money and power? Unfortunately, Lady Justice's blindness generally treats some more harshly than others within the U.S. Justice system (if you would like to examine the evidence, it is easily accessible through a simple Google search). But, this is not a problem with the God-ordained way of doing things. In fact, man's inability to do what God has commanded has never shown a weakness in the prescription of God! So, if God ordained the civil authorities to bear the sword, we must accept that and use the power we have as citizens to help the government punish the evildoers (despite their race, class, or wealth). Also, we would do well to acknowledge that some who have not done evil have been mistreated within the justice system. This is not a knock on God's perfect design but another comment on man's inferiority and inability to be divinely perfect.

One final objection: is it hypocritical to support the death penalty and condemn abortion and euthanasia? Is it inconsistent to support the punishment of criminals and condemn the murder of elderly and unborn babies? Absolutely not. God breathed the breath of life into man (Gen. 2:7). Therefore, Christians must hold to a sanctity of life view. That is to say that life as given by God to the pinnacle of His creation is something distinct and glorious, perfect, and precious.

Support of the death penalty for Christians is not about torture or revenge. Support of the death penalty is not about declaring the government to be perfect. Support of the death penalty is about recognizing the God given role of government. Support of the death penalty is not about Christians blindly accepting it in every circumstance nor

remaining silent when we believe injustice is done. Support of the death penalty recognizes that life is precious and ruining a life is best met with swift punishment. And, supporting the death penalty is about protecting the sanctity of life as viewed by God by punishing those who do not regard innocent human life.