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The Death Penalty, Christianity, and the Bible

Many Christian denominations – including the Roman Catholic Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, United Methodist Church, and the United Church of Christ – have taken an official stand against the death penalty in America, arguing that it is contrary to their beliefs.

Other Christian denominations – most notably the Southern Baptist Convention – are in favor of the death penalty. They base their position on a traditional understanding of the Bible. Passages such as “He who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed” (Gen. 9:6) and “Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth” (Deut. 19:21) are often cited to show that the Bible allows or even mandates the death penalty. A closer examination of the Old and New Testaments, however, shows that this is not the only possible understanding, and many Christians of all denominations interpret the Bible differently.

The following are some key issues for understanding the Bible and the death penalty.

The Death Penalty in the Old Testament. The death penalty is referred to repeatedly in the Old Testament, particularly in the Pentateuch (or first five books) that contains the laws of the ancient Israelites. Attention usually focuses on passages on the punishment of murderers: “Anyone who by violence causes a death must be put to death” (Ex. 21:12). Murder, though, is not the only that which calls for the death penalty. The death penalty was required for blasphemy (Lev. 24:16), adultery and incest (Lev. 20:10-11), enslaving others (Deut. 24:7), cursing ones parents (Deut. 21:17), violating the Sabbath (Ex. 35:2), perjury (Deut. 19:18-19), practicing magic (Lev. 20:27), bestiality (Lev. 20:15-16), and idolatry (Deut. 13:5). Any attempt to justify the death penalty by appealing to the Bible must account for why these offenses no longer merit the death penalty. Similarly, appeals to “a life for a life” must explain why proportionate punishment is only required for murder and not other crimes, such as maiming (“an eye for an eye”).

The Purpose of the Death Penalty. In the Pentateuch, the death penalty was not only punishment but also a sacrificial atonement for sin: “Blood profanes the country and for the country, the only expiation for the blood shed in it is the blood of the man who shed it” (Num. 35:33). For many Christians, this understanding of the death penalty is at odds with their belief that the death of Jesus should serve as the unique sacrifice for all sins (cf. Rom. 3:23-26).

Restrictions on the Death Penalty. The Old Testament also placed significant restrictions on capital punishment. Not every murder was eligible for the death penalty (Num. 35:22). A murderer could be sentenced to death only based on the testimony of two or more eye-witnesses (Deut. 17:6) – a single witness or circumstantial evidence was not sufficient. An abiding concern in the Old Testament is the risk of executing the innocent (e.g., Ex. 23:7). Because of these passages, the Talmud – the Jewish regulations intended to interpret and implement the Old Testament laws – placed extraordinary safeguards around capital cases, so many that in practice there was a moratorium on executions. It is reasonable to ask if the modern death penalty system meets these standards, and if it should be abolished if it does not.

Alternatives to the Death Penalty in the Old Testament. In Genesis, the story of the first murder is carefully recounted: Cain murdered his brother Abel. Rather than killing Cain, God sent him into exile. Further, he marked Cain so that “no one coming across him would kill him” (Gen. 4:15). Later, the Prophets called for mercy, not death, for sinners: “If the wicked, however, renounces all the sins he has committed ... he will most certainly live, he will not die” (Eze. 18:21). Thus it can be argued that the Bible does not mandate the death penalty.

The Death Penalty in the Teaching of Jesus. Jesus never directly talks about the death penalty. However, in two passages he seems to challenge the then contemporary understanding of the laws requiring it. In the Sermon on the Mount, he repudiates the *Lex Talionis* passage on “an eye for an eye,” and instead calls on his listeners to “love your enemies” (Matt. 5:38-48). Later, when the woman caught in adultery (a capital offense) is brought before Jesus, he refuses to support her stoning. Instead, he challenges the moral authority of her accusers, causing them to abandon their quest to kill her (John 8:1-11). Passages such as these lead many Christians to question whether the death penalty is consistent with Jesus’ teachings on mercy and forgiveness.

The Death Penalty in Paul. The passage most commonly cited in support of the death penalty from the New Testament comes from Paul’s Letter to the Romans. In discussing the role of civil authorities, he writes “it is not for nothing that the symbol of authority is the sword: it is there to serve God, too, as his avenger, to bring retribution to wrong-doers” (Rom. 13:4). It is important to point out that the word in Greek for “sword” refers not to a broadsword (used in executions) but to a short-sword or dagger, a symbol of authority to enforce the law. It need not be understood as referring specifically to capital punishment. (In the same way, the President of Trinity College carries a mace as a sign of his authority, but he is not expected to use it to beat students or faculty.) Any understanding of this passage must be balanced against the first half, which enjoins the early Christians to “never pay back evil with evil” (Rom. 12:17) and to “master evil with good” (Rom. 12:21).

*All Scriptural quotations are taken from the New Jerusalem Bible, Doubleday, 1985. Much of this fact sheet is based Dale Recinella’s book, **The Biblical Truth About America’s Death Penalty** (Northeastern University Press, 2004).*