

What Does the Bible Say About Capital Punishment?

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If you are like me, you may be for the death penalty and believe that the Bible not only authorizes it but commands it. Nevertheless we should inject a word of caution here as we review the biblical evidence for the death penalty. The first mention of the death penalty is in Genesis 9:6, "Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man". This is backed up by the Mosaic Law in Leviticus 24:17. The general principle then is that premeditated murder, and Moses made the distinction in Exodus 21, is generally punishable by death. Since man was made in the image of God it is a special offense against God that was in force before and after the laws of Moses were given to govern Israel. The New Testament verse usually used to prove that the death penalty was still in affect even after Jesus is Romans 13:4, "the government does not bear the sword for nothing". In addition to this Paul, while under arrest in Acts 25:10-12, said that if he had committed the crime they accused him of he would be willing to die, thus Paul recognized the governments authority to execute criminals.

Other Offenses

There are a large number of offenses in the Mosaic Law which were applicable specifically to the nation of Israel and punishable by death in Exodus and Leviticus. Crimes like adultery, bestiality, kidnapping, smiting or cursing your parents, blasphemy, perjury in a murder trial, and even excessive eating and drinking in Deut. 21:20-21. (I wonder how they decided what excessive is?) Again, most theologians consider these commands as given to the nation of Israel and not necessarily for us today. Therefore, the one command that we can consider to be timeless before Israel and after Christ ushered in the New Covenant would be the death penalty for premeditated murder given in Genesis 9:6 to Noah.

Not So Fast

Before you rush to agree with me, there are a few considerations. First the death penalty in the Bible itself is not consistently carried out. Consider that the very first murder was recorded in Genesis 4 when Cain slew Able. God punished him by banishment and exile only. King David committed adultery and premeditated mass murder in 2 Samuel 11, but God forgave him and let him continue on as king. Secondly, as Jesus is approaching His crucifixion in Luke 23:34, He says, "Father forgive them". Jesus forgave the very men who were responsible for His murder.

My conclusion is that the death penalty for premeditated murder is allowed, but not necessarily required by the Bible.

What About The Ten Commandments ?

In Exodus 20:13, the King James Version (translated in 1611), read, "Thou shalt not kill". Virtually all experts in Hebrew now say that the proper translation of the original Hebrew word is "murder" not kill. Therefore a distinction is made between legal execution and premeditated murder.

In Defending Capital Punishment Should We Use the Mosaic Law ?

I believe the provisions given by Moses were specifically for Israel, and were unique to them because they were a new nation that God was setting apart from all other nations. Their law especially set them apart from the Canaanites that they were dispossessing, and many of the offenses listed like infant sacrifice to Molech were Canaanite abominations. Infant sacrifice, incest, and bestiality were normal activities for the Canaanites that God wanted to particularly separate Israel from and thus Moses gave the death penalty as a deterrent to Israel joining in Canaanite lifestyle. The death penalty was given for a wide

variety of offenses that we would not be interested in today. The method commanded to carry out the death penalty would also present a problem for most of us—stoning. The whole community would gather and stone the offender to death. In our culture today, if adultery, blasphemy, and sodomy were punishable by stoning, we would run out of rocks.

Consider Lev. 24:14, a man was stoned to death by all the congregation for cursing. Imagine your regular golf foursome on Saturday morning—Joe Blow misses a putt and curses his bad luck. According to the Law of Moses you would bind him and all the club members would gather to stone him to death. Now Joe may deserve it but it is not going to happen even by the Mosaic Law because: 1. The law did not apply to outsiders, 2. In Israel there was no separation between church and state but in America there is. These laws against cursing in Israel were as much religious laws as they were national laws, but we have a Constitution forbidding that.

Conclusion

My conclusion is that the biblical principle that applies to us regarding capital punishment comes from Gen. 9:6. The government's right to legislate and enforce it comes from Romans 13. Nevertheless, it is not mandatory, and it should be limited to premeditated murder.

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