

## Capital Punishment

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Humans are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26,27). "And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Genesis 2:7). Humans are not made in the physical image of God, but are spiritual and eternal beings like God. That makes us, the human race, unique from the rest of creation. Human life, therefore, is sacred, and we above all creatures great and small should recognize and realize the sanctity of life.

As we examine the topic of "Capital Punishment," we are not concerned with the political views of society whether here in America or in Africa or in Europe. Political views are not the standard and are most often based upon the fallible reasoning of man. The words of Jeremiah the prophet ought to ring loud and clear. He wrote, "O LORD, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps" (Jeremiah 10:23). Solomon also commented on the subject when he wrote, "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" (Proverbs 14:12).

Our examination concerns the Bible, God's word. We are asking for a "thus saith the Lord" on the topic of "Capital Punishment." The Bible is the inerrant, inspired word of God (2 Timothy 3:16,17) and provides for mankind "all things that pertain unto life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3). Therefore, we should expect the Bible to provide some principle, some rule, or some ideology on this matter. Such is clearly provided.

Finally in way of introduction, we need to speak about our approach to the topic. The topic of "Capital Punishment" is an emotionally charged topic. For this reason, we need to strive to set aside

emotions, and let reason prevail. We need to set aside our feelings, and let God's word speak. We need to open our minds and put on the garments of integrity, honesty, and rightness. And when we put such on, we will make the necessary application, and we will bring our views into conformity with what God teaches.

### Civil Authorities

The role of civil authorities in God's scheme of things is clear. There are three institutions which God instituted. With the creation, God established the first institution — the home. Later as the population of man grew, He would establish the nations. And though it was in the mind of God before the foundation of the earth, God established the church about five thousand years after the creation. Concerning the role of civil authorities, Paul wrote, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God." The "higher powers" of this verse refers to civil governments, and every person is to be in subjection unto civil authorities. Why? Because God through His providence has provided them for us. This does not mean that every ruler and every government and every deed of every ruler and every government are approved of God. It simply means the ultimate source of civil authority is God. Divine origin does not mean perfection. Man has divine origin. God created us, but man is not perfect. All men have sinned. The home has divine origin, but because the home is comprised of imperfect humans, it lacks perfection. So, it is with civil governments.

Paul continues in Romans 13 by stating, "Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation" (verse 2). It is a very serious matter to resist civil authority. Why? Because to resist civil authority is to resist God. When a person violates the laws of a nation, he violates the law of God. This principle is stated several times within the New Testament. Writing to Titus, Paul said, "Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work" (Titus 3:1). Peter wrote, "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well" (1 Peter 2:13,14). Keep in mind, when Paul and Peter penned these words, Christians were being persecuted by the Roman government. Even in such circumstances, man is to submit to the higher powers. Whether we agree with a law or not makes little difference. We are still to be subject to governmental authority. The only exception to this rule is when the laws of a nation violates the laws of God (Acts 5:29).

Continuing in Romans 13, Paul wrote, "For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same" (verse 3). Here Paul alludes to the God-given purpose to which governments serve — "for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well" (1 Peter 2:14). Law abiding citizens do not need to fear governmental authority. However, law breaking citizens ought to fear such.

In addition, Romans 13:4 states, "For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil." The nations exist to serve God. In fact, the first few verses

of chapter 13 continues with a subject introduced in chapter 12 (Hightower 194). Paul wrote, "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (12:19). Personal vengeance is clearly condemned. However, civil authority is God's minister or servant to bring vengeance upon the evil doer. Those who do evil ought to be afraid of civil authority because God intends for nations to bear the sword. The sword in this passage refers to the instrument of execution though not exclusive to this purpose (see Matthew 26:52; Luke 21:24; Acts 12:2; 16:27; Hebrews 11:34, 37; Revelation 13:10) (Hightower 198). By inspiration, Paul understood there are some crimes which demand the death penalty. This principle is found in other passages of scriptures. Moses wrote, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man" (Genesis 9:6). In Acts 25:11 Paul states, "For if I be an offender, or have committed any thing worthy of death, I refuse not to die: but if there be none of these things whereof these accuse me, no man may deliver me unto them. I appeal unto Caesar." When Jesus quietly stood before Pilate during His mock trial, Pilate chastised the Lord by reminding Him of his authority. Notice Jesus' response, "Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin" (John 19:10,11). Jesus clearly states Pilate's authority to execute criminals was given to him by God.

We conclude our study of Romans 13 with verse 5, "Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake." Paul brings the thought to application and conclusion. Two reasons are given for obeying civil authority: to avoid punishment and to avoid violating one's conscience (Weir 244).

### Purpose

Notice again our text of Romans 13:4 which says, "for he (the civil authority - CN) beareth not the sword in vain." "In vain" means "without purpose" or "without just cause" (Strongs). In other words, the bearing of the sword by the civil government serves a purpose. So we ask, "What purpose does it serve?"

Certainly one of the primary purposes capital punishment serves is as an effective deterrent (Taylor 229). In part, this is what the Holy Spirit had in mind. Notice the number of references Paul by inspiration made to terror and fear:

- ! "For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil."
- ! "Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power?"
- ! "But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid;"

Though some will argue, punishment for crimes do deter offenses. Speeding tickets deter speeders. It is bad enough on our streets and highways, but could you imagine how much worse it would be if no tickets were issued. A person can argue that tickets do not deter speeders, but it is always amazing to watch how slow traffic flows when a highway patrol car is visible. Admittedly, the "slap on the hand" by some judicial systems like ours in the U.S. do not seemingly deter crimes. However, that is not the fault of the principle found within scripture, but how the principle is not practiced in faulty judicial systems. When swift and sure punishment of crimes are judged and administered, then crimes will be deterred.

Another purpose for capital punishment is the protection of society. When murderers are killed, they will not murder again, and society is protected from them (Taylor 229). However, some will argue that jails protect society from criminals. That may be true to some extent, but no matter how secure we think a jail or a prison is, some cunning criminal will find a way to escape and menace society. Also, prisons may protect society from most prisoners, but it does not protect prisoners from their fellow inmates. Murders and violent crimes are common place within prison walls. Capital punishment enacted by governing authorities protect all of society from violent criminals.

### Objections

Probably the most often heard objection to capital punishment is the sixth commandment of the Decalogue — “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13; see also Deuteronomy 5:17; Matthew 5:21; Romans 13:9). The sixth commandment is not an absolute prohibition against taking of life. The word “kill” actually means “to commit murder” (Strong’s). Clearly the prohibition was not against all killing because the penalty for violating it was death. In Deuteronomy 19:11,12, Moses wrote, “But if any man hate his neighbour, and lie in wait for him, and rise up against him, and smite him mortally that he die, and fleeth into one of these cities: Then the elders of his city shall send and fetch him thence, and deliver him into the hand of the avenger of blood, that he may die” (Meadows 219)

Another often heard objection against capital punishment is it is not loving. Such an objection is absurd and narrow in focus for it focuses upon the criminals and ignores the victims. Those who object think it is loving for a judge to slap a criminal’s hand, tell him not to do it again, and send him to jail for a few short years. When the criminal is released, he perpetrates another crime, and the process starts again. Question: Is it loving to allow the criminal the opportunity to victimize another precious soul? When appropriate punishment is not served, it allows criminals the opportunity to commit other heinous crimes. Besides, Bible love demands discipline (Hebrews 12:5-11). God is love (1 John 4:8). God provides civil authority to discipline and/or punish evildoers. Therefore, it must be loving to discipline and/or punish evildoers.

A further objection is capital punishment was for the Mosaic dispensation. The truth is, however, it is for all dispensations. Genesis 9:6 which says, “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man” was given to Noah during Patriarchy. Capital punishment for murder and other crimes (most scholars count twenty plus crimes) was given to Moses in the Mosaic age. And in the New Testament age, Romans 13:4 speaks loud and clear.

Lenski points out another objection in his commentary on Romans which he refuted (792). The objection says if Paul had written later after Nero began his reign of terror against Christians, “he would not have written as he does.” The objection overlooks inspiration. The all-knowing Spirit of God would have known such. Lenski points out the Jews had Herod the Great who persecuted and killed them, the Sanhedrin crucified Christ and employed Saul to persecute Christians (792).

In addition, some object on the basis of the question, “What crimes would deserve capital punishment?” The Old Testament which was written for our learning and admonition (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11) would, in the least, be a good place to start. Having said this, there is another

consideration: our ignorance does not relieve us of our responsibility. Though there may be some crimes we are not sure of, there are some violent crimes we can be sure that deserve capital punishment such as premeditated murder, rape, and vicious assaults.

The next objection we will consider is when capital punishment is practiced, it ends any chance of conversion. The reality is when a person is left to his own devices such as is the case with criminals, they wax worse and worse. But also consider this: God has “appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:31). There will come a time when God’s patience will come to an end, and He will destroy the world and bring men into judgment (2 Peter 3:9-11). Since God is our example and standard of righteousness, and since He has provided a way to punish evildoers (civil authority), then it is right and just for the patience of men to end and bring judgment upon workers of iniquity. God is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9) and “will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4), and, yet, He terminated the physical lives of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10). By doing such, He also terminated any chance of repentance.

A final objection some make is that it is right for non-Christians but not for Christians to practice capital punishment. Civil authorities work through individuals. This objection stem from the question of sin. Is it sinful for a person to wield the sword, tighten the noose, flip the switch, or give an injection to carry out capital punishment for the civil government? We have already established that it is right for civil authorities to practice capital punishment. How can this take place without an individual working for the civil authority? It cannot. Since capital punishment cannot be accomplished without the actions of an individual, then it must be right for an individual to carry out capital punishment for the civil authority. Is it right for the non-Christian but not the Christian? Are there two standards for sin? No, of course not. There is not a standard for the sinner and another for the saint. All men are amenable to the law of God. If it is right for one, then it is right for the other (Weir 245). At this point someone objects and says, “God sometimes used evil men to accomplish His purpose.” While this is true, God never asked men, whether good or bad, to commit an evil deed (Hightower 200). Having said this, it may be the case that some people would violate their conscience by carrying out this action for the state. If that be the case, then it would be sin for that individual (Romans 14:23; 1 John 3:20, 21).

## Conclusion

Though some would argue, yet the Bible is clear. God has provided civil governments “for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well.” One aspect of the punishment of evildoers is the nation “beareth not the sword in vain.” Though not limited to capital punishment, this statement certainly would include it. It is right, just, and fair for the civil authorities to deter crime and protect society by means of capital punishment.

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