

*Capital Punishment*

All killing, I would submit, is not murder, any more than all sexual intercourse is rape. On the contrary, just as rape is the violent rejection of, and a rebellion against, the dignity of the person and the institution of marriage, murder is a violent rejection of, and rebellion against, the sanctity of human life and the state's legitimate interest in law and order.

I will say more concerning a Biblical perspective, but it is worth noting here that the best scriptural manuscripts render the sixth commandment: "You shall not commit murder". This is important because it helps us to avoid an erroneous scriptural justification for the invalid premise that all killing is murder. Second, the claim is sometimes made that capital punishment is the violent act of a barbaric and uncivilized society and as such debases every member of that society. This viewpoint rests on the false premise that all killing is uncivilized and barbaric.

As I have just argued, historically and at present, killing is allowed in many instances, just to name one for example, that of self-defence. This cannot be construed as violent, barbaric or uncivilized. Indeed, to assert that judicial execution on grounds of premeditated murder is an act of violence or barbarism is to deny society the right to impose a just penalty for the ultimate violation of laws designed to uphold civilized order. Further, it is to invert completely the very meaning and process of civilization itself.

Often underlying these two concerns is the belief that capital punishment cannot be reconciled with Christian love and mercy. While a detailed Biblical and theological analysis is beyond the scope of these brief remarks, nevertheless I feel I am bound to make some effort to outline my position on this important matter. I believe the Bible clearly provides for capital punishment as an option for the state in cases of premeditated murder. There is no disagreement that this is the case in the Old Testament where at least three principles may be found: first, there is a clear delineation between accidental and premeditated murder: second, the death sentence can only be applied if the murder is substantiated by two or more witnesses: and, third, failure to execute is disobedience to God.

In the New Testament, Romans 13:1-7 and I Peter 2:13-15 are two of the clearest scriptural expressions of God's will regarding his mandate for the state. In Romans 12:19 we read personal vengeance is prohibited and we are instructed to leave room for God's wrath. Just five verses later, in Romans 13:3 and 4, it is clear that one way in which God may exercise his wrath is through the civil authority which "does not bear the sword for nothing" and is "God's servant, an agent of his wrath, to bring punishment on the wrongdoer". The Apostle Paul explicitly recognized this authority in according the state the right to exercise capital punishment upon himself should he be found "guilty of doing anything deserving death", (Acts 25:10-11).

In spite of the foregoing, some Christians have summoned other New Testament texts to argue against capital punishment. I am particularly concerned by attempts to apply the Sermon on the Mount in this regard. Certainly the words of

Jesus concern the conduct expected from the Christian even when victimized. However, they neither preclude nor contradict the fact that God, true to his character, will exercise his judgment upon the guilty offender. As I stated earlier, one means by which his judgment upon crime may take place is through the state, instituted by God for law, order and the protection of life.

Additionally, to suggest that Jesus takes a position on capital punishment in John 8:1-11, is to bypass completely the fundamental significance of this encounter recorded by John. The explicit intent of the Pharisees' question was to trap and thereby accuse Jesus. If he said "no", he violated the Mosaic law. If he said "yes", he violated Roman law, which prohibited the Jews from executing anyone, a right reserved for Roman authorities alone, according to John 18:31. Therefore, given the express nature of the question, the words of Jesus are directed at the sin of the Pharisees and the adulterous woman. They are not a comment on capital punishment.

We all know that God is love. But God is also holy, just and righteous. The position we take on capital punishment must be scripturally faithful and theologically orthodox with respect to the doctrines of God, man, sin, salvation and judgment.

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As we seek to interpret Scripture and have Scripture interpret us, it is evident that the presuppositions that we bring to Scripture our textual analysis and our application on personal, ecclesiastical, social or political levels, or on a topic such as this, must be guided by all of Scripture according to II Timothy 3:16 and not just a verse taken out of context here or there. To do otherwise is to leave oneself vulnerable to positions which are neither biblical nor Christian. Indeed, I fear that much of the so-called Christian love and mercy which is cited as an argument against capital punishment has unwittingly fallen captive to the permissiveness of liberal humanism.

Four, some argue that capital punishment is not a deterrent. Proponents of this position often seek to support their case by pointing to the fact that since the abolition of capital punishment in 1976, the annual total homicide rate has gone down from 711 in 1977 to 561 by the end of 1986, a decline of 21 per cent. We must remember that approximately two-thirds of these murders are second-degree and therefore would not be subject to the death sentence in any case. However, first-degree murder statistics actually increased during those very same years from 202 in 1977 to 260 in 1986, an increase of 29 per cent. Those are the real statistics for this debate.

I do not understand why abolitionists always use the total murder rates focusing upon the total murder statistics only. It appears to me that they are being very highly selective in their use of statistics.