

Biblical Reflection: Death Penalty

Excerpted from the Washington Office Death Penalty Guide.

Old Testament Themes

The Old Testament allows the death penalty to be applied in several cases, including adultery, accidental manslaughter and rebellious teenagers (Exodus 21). However, limitations are prominent. "An eye for an eye" was not a command to seek vengeance, but a limitation on retribution. The standard of proof for death penalty convictions was higher than the current "beyond a reasonable doubt" standard and required absolute certainty of at least two eye witnesses (Deuteronomy 17 and 19). Additionally, unequal wealth and power and unequal justice were as much a sin as crimes.

Murderers in the Bible: Cain, Moses, David, Paul. Should they have been executed?

Another theme in the Old Testament is mercy for the offender. After the first recorded murder, God grants protection to Cain, the murderer (Genesis 4). Cities of refuge were sanctuaries where the guilty could escape the revenge of the victim's family (Numbers 35, Deuteronomy 4 and 19, Joshua 20). The themes of Deuteronomy 32:35 ("To me belong vengeance and recompense") and Leviticus 19:18 ("You shall not take vengeance... but love your neighbor as yourself") recur frequently in the Old Testament.

New Testament Themes

- Jesus built on the Old Testament tradition that life is sacred. Jesus teaches that we are to love and forgive those who harm us. If we love God, Jesus says we are obligated to show that love in our actions toward others. Christ moves us from the Old Testament perspective of limited retaliation to non-retaliation and active love (Romans 12, I John 4, Luke 6:27-36).
- Christ was asked to rule on a death penalty case. His response: "Let one without sin cast the first stone" (John 8:7).
- Christ's death on the cross, itself an application of capital punishment, canceled the Old Testament basis of shedding blood to testify to life's sacredness (Hebrews 10). Christ died that others may live. By trading places with the guilty and the enemy, by dying in the place of the murderer Barabbas, Christ closed off any sacrificial reason for the death penalty.
- Jesus did not die for some sinners. He died for all. Unless we believe that every person, whether murderer or not, is redeemable and must have the chance to be redeemed, there is no real gospel. To deprive a person of the possibility of reconciliation to God and humanity is the real tragedy of capital punishment.

--Adapted from *Death As a Penalty: A Moral, Practical and Theological Discussion* by Howard Zehr (Mennonite Central Committee, 1998).

Biblical Passages for Reflection

- Genesis 9:6 states: "Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind." Is this verse prescriptive or descriptive?
- Can we imagine Jesus supporting the death penalty? What do his words and actions tell us?

- Does Christ's atoning death apply to everyone? Even a murderer? Does this have binding effects on the state and all persons? (Romans 5:22-26; 2 Corinthians 5:17,21; Hebrews 10:10,14; 1 John 2:2, 4:7-12)
- Some suggest that Jesus' death calls into question authorities and the powers that lie behind them (Colossians 2:14-15). How might this affect our outlook on the death penalty?

Additional Passages for Study

- Genesis 4, 9:6
- Exodus 20:13, 21:12-29, 22:18-21, 31:14
- Leviticus 19:17-18; 20; 24
- Numbers 15:32-34; 35
- Deuteronomy 17-22, 24:16
- Ezekiel 33:11
- Matthew 5:38-39
- John 8:1-11
- Romans 12 and 13