



Capitol Punishment

James E. Read

Recent headlines about Timothy McVeigh have brought the question of capital punishment back to life.

Odd as it may seem to those who are not Christians, the death penalty is not an issue that the church is agreed on. This is because biblical and theological support can be mustered for several options.

Those who are “abolitionists” and believe that capital punishment is never right rest their case on Christian teaching about the sanctity of life, and the importance of grace—especially forgiving grace. “Forgive as the Lord forgave you,” says Colossians 3:13. And what has God forgiven us? Sins that merit hell. Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is something else that Christian abolitionists urge us to take to heart: “Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also...Love your enemies.” What makes this position seem untenable to many Christians is that if these verses intend to rule out capital punishment, they must equally rule out all retributive punishment, not only the death penalty.

While the Catholic Church is edging towards abolition, it doesn’t go this far. In his 1995 encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II said that “great care must be taken to respect every life, even that of criminals and unjust aggressors” because of the sacredness of all human life. He didn’t rule out the death penalty altogether but said we “ought not to

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203-290 VAUGHAN STREET • WINNIPEG, MANITOBA • CANADA R3B 2N8 • PHONE: (204) 957-2412 • FAX: (204) 957-2418
EMAIL: ETHICS_CENTRE@CAN.SALVATIONARMY.ORG

go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity: in other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society.” “Such cases,” the Pope added, “are very rare, if not practically non-existent.” Would Timothy McVeigh count as such a case? Probably not.

McVeigh’s crime reminds me of a celebrated case here in Canada in which a man and his wife kidnapped, raped, and murdered several young women—the wife’s own sister among them! In the end there was no question of guilt. But neither of them was sentenced to death. The husband was handed a life sentence, and the wife (because of a plea bargain in exchange for her testimony) a mere twelve years. I remember feeling this wasn’t enough. Twelve years in prison, or even a whole life, didn’t seem to show sufficient regard for the lives of their victims or the devastation brought on the victims’ families.

Many Old Testament passages talk about punishment fitting the crime: “if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye...,” etc. Romans 13:4 is consistent with these passages. Referring to the state’s power, it says: “If you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.” Christians who believe there is an argument for the death penalty are not wrong.

So, if thoughtful Christians can hold widely divergent views about this issue and have principled reasons for doing so, are any options ruled out?

There are at least two worth mentioning. The first is that an argument for capital punishment is not an argument for the state’s unlimited power. Christians ought to be the most sensitized of all to this point. After all, the Jesus we worship was put to death as the

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result of a court-ordered death sentence. No Christian would say Jesus deserved to die! Rather, the various court proceedings made a mockery of justice, and the execution was evil through and through. So, if we are to support a public policy that allows for capital punishment, it must be one that is equally aware of the danger of the miscarriage of justice.

The second is that there is no place for blood-thirstiness. Christians who think that people like Timothy McVeigh or the Bernardos (the Canadian couple I referred to) deserve to be put to death can take no delight in the thought. At the beginning of May, I happened to be speaking at Youth Councils in the city where the Bernardos were imprisoned. A Salvationist judge who lives in that city took me on a tour, pointing out a house built opposite the old courthouse. The most unusual feature of the house was a tall turreted tower. It had been built to give spectators a better view of the hangings in the yard behind the courthouse.

It's no different these days: the T-shirts in Terre Haute that bear the face of Timothy McVeigh and the slogan, "Die, die, die" are outselling those urging clemency by 20 to 1. I can't see any explanation for this except that people enjoy hating the man who is to be executed. And what Bible-believing Christian can defend that emotion? Even those who think he deserves the death penalty should weep for the necessity of it, and pray for the salvation of his soul.

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