State Killing

Is the death penalty appropriate? Is it consistent with biblical values regarding life? More than 3,700 people are on death row and 746 people have been executed since the United States reinstated the death penalty in 1976 (as of Dec. 4, 2001).

Did you know?

Every western democracy except the United States has abolished the death penalty.

More than half the countries in the world (109) have now abolished the death penalty in law or practice. Eighty-six countries retain the death penalty. [Source: Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC), Amnesty International.]

Thirty-eight states, the federal government, and the U.S. military have the death penalty.

The United States leads the world in killing juveniles.

Since 1990, only six countries have executed people for crimes they committed before the age of 18: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iran, Nigeria and the United States. Since 1976, the United States has executed 17 juvenile offenders, more than any other country. [Sources: DPIC; National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (NCADP).]

The death penalty is inequitable.

With only one of 100 convicted murderers sentenced to death and even fewer actually executed [Source: Uniform Crime Reports—FBI.], several studies indicate those selected for death are disproportionately people of color, male, poor, and those whose victim was white.

Innocent people could or might have been executed.

Since 1973, 98 people in 24 states have been released from death row with evidence of their innocence. [Source: DPIC.] Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor recently stated, “If statistics are any indication, the system may well be allowing some innocent defendants to be executed.”

The death penalty costs more than life imprisonment.

Studies show that the cost of a single capital case, from arrest to execution, is three to 10 times more expensive than a non-death penalty case—even one resulting in a sentence of life without possibility of parole. [Source: NCADP.]

The death penalty does not deter crime.

Statistical studies do not support the claim that the death penalty deters people from committing murder. The average murder rate in states which have abolished the death penalty is lower than that in states still using it. [Source: NCADP.]

Some murderers genuinely do reform. But for those who need long-term restraint, imprisonment can effectively protect society. Thirty-five out of 38 states with the death penalty, and 11 of 12 states without the death penalty, have life without parole sentencing options. [Source: DPIC.]

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) U.S. Washington Office is a Mennonite and Brethren in Christ presence on Capitol Hill which gives and encourages prophetic witness to the way of Christ on matters of U.S. public policy. To order in bulk or for other resources, contact: MCC Washington Office, 110 Maryland Ave NE #502, Washington, DC 20002; mccwash@mcc.org. Compiled by Karl S. Shelly in July 1998; revised in December 2001 by David Whettstone.
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’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. Depriving a person of the possibility of reconciliation with God and humanity is the real tragedy of capital punishment.

BIBLICAL TEXTS FOR STUDY

- Genesis 4: 9:6
- 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 13

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.

Biblical and Theological Perspectives on the Death Penalty

Text adapted from Death as a Penalty: A Moral, Practical and Theological Discussion by Howard Zehr (Mennonite Central Committee, revised 1998)
Faith that Reflects, Faith that Acts

Practical Efforts Against the Death Penalty

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 people? (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?

For Further Reflection

Are we all murderers in God’s eyes?

How do we practice grace and forgiveness? Is it possible that anger and hate, moving from individual to society, can contribute to murder? Does capital punishment foster the cycle of anger and hate?

Do victims’ families need the death penalty?

What are the needs of victims’ families? What does a community need in the case of a capital crime? What are the consequences of a criminal justice system and society centered on the execution of a murderer? Are victims’ needs effectively met by killing someone else, causing another family grief and pain, adding to the cycle of violence and vengeance?

Marietta Jaeger and numerous victims’ family members have answered “no.” Her 7-year-old daughter was kidnapped and murdered years ago. Jaeger has testified: “To kill somebody in [my daughter’s] name is really to violate her and profane her. I’d rather honor her life by saying that all of life is sacred and all of life is worthy of preservation.” Marietta Jaeger on Forgiveness (1988, 28 min., MCC video) available for loan from MCC.

Mourn for all those who are put to death.*

Murder and capital punishment are an assault on us all. Every time a killing occurs, we all feel the pain, the horror, the sin. It’s as if evil just keeping marching on. But there’s healing in mourning. Each time we mourn, we affirm the God-cherished character of the one who has been killed. Each time we mourn, we deepen our sense of solidarity with those whom God is raising from the dead. Each time we mourn, we take on a little more of God’s own spirit. Each time we mourn, we gain a little more of the strength we need.

Action Ideas

• Start a personal relationship with a person on death row through letter writing or visitation.

• Reach out to crime victims and their families through prayer and practical aid. The life and work of Sister Helen Prejean demonstrates that opposition to the death penalty is not an anti-victim stance. It should mean honoring victims, their families and communities and caring for every life.

• Educate yourself; create a “culture of resistance.” The facts and biblical reflection support speaking out against capital punishment. We need to draw others into deep relationships with God and people that make capital punishment unthinkable. The families of those on death row and legal aid groups who offer competent defense need your help, whether in your own state or in an area with a high level of capital convictions.

• Learn your elected officials’ position. Some politicians support state killing with little accountability. We must encourage alternatives. Urge your elected officials to support preventive programs that break the cycle of violence, revenge and retribution. Help create sentiment and support that empowers them in this direction. What kind of prayer and preparation do these actions require?

• Lead your congregation to publicly oppose executions through media and public statements, ringing church bells or displaying a banner** outside when the state executes, participating in execution vigils, attending a capital trial, writing an op-ed piece for a local paper and hosting public meetings on this issue.

The “Moratorium Now” Campaign (of the Quixote Center) asks local churches, city councils and other organizations to pass resolutions urging elected officials to halt executions. For more information: PO Box 5206, Hyattsville, MD 20782; 301-699-0042; www.quixote.org/ej; ejusa@quixote.org.


**One source: For Whom the Bells Toll, 19 Dearborn St., Medford, MA 02155; www.curenational.org/bells; dotbop@juno.com.
Resources on the Death Penalty

Books and Videos

Against the Death Penalty: Christian and Secular Arguments Against Capital Punishment

Beyond the News: Murder Close Up
Mennonite Media Ministries video (1995, 35 min.). A study of murder and its effects. Asks whether the death penalty is ever right. Stories from families of victims. 1-800-999-3534. Also available for loan from MCC.

Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice
Howard Zehr (Herald Press, 1995). A very readable critique of our criminal justice system and a call for a “restorative justice” model which focuses on the needs of crime victims and offenders.

Religious Statements on the Death Penalty (free); Living and Dying According to Voice of Faith, $5 (skits for education and reflection); Sermons . . . Reflections, $4; Dead Man Walking study packet, $3.

Death as a Penalty: A Moral, Practical and Theological Discussion
Howard Zehr (Mennonite Central Committee, revised 1998). A booklet discussing the issues surrounding the death penalty.

Who Owns Death? Capital Punishment, the American Conscience, and the End of Executions
Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell (William Morrow, 2000). Analysis of the status of the U.S. death penalty, including psychological aspects and contentions that the death penalty is slowly losing its support.


The Death Penalty: An Historical and Theological Survey
James J. Megivern (Paulist Press, 1997).

The Death Penalty in America: Current Controversies
Hugo Adam Bedau, editor (Oxford University Press, 1997).

Organizations

Amnesty International USA—Program to Abolish the Death Penalty
600 Pennsylvania Avenue SE, 5th Floor
Washington, DC 20003
Phone: (202) 544-0200
E-mail: dpprogram@aiusa.org
Web: www.amnesty-usa.org/abolish
General and faith-based resources; annual National Weekend of Faith in Action on the Death Penalty.

Death Penalty Information Center
1320 18th Street NW, 5th Floor
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: (202) 293-6970
E-mail: dpic@essential.org
Web: www.deathpenaltyinfo.org
Provides extensive analysis and information on the death penalty.

Death Row Support Project
PO Box 600, Dept. S
Liberty Mills, IN 46946
Phone: (219) 982-7480
Facilitates correspondence with people on death row.

MCC U.S. Washington Office
110 Maryland Avenue NE, Suite 502
Washington, DC 20002
Phone: (202) 544-6564; Fax (202) 544-2820
E-mail: mccwash@mcc.org
Web: www.mcc.org

Murder Victims Families for Reconciliation
2161 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02140
Phone: (617) 868-0007
E-mail: cushing@mvfr.org
Web: www.mvfr.org
Opposes the death penalty and other violent responses.

National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty
1436 U Street NW, #104
Washington, DC 20009
Phone: (202) 387-3890
E-mail: infor@ncadp.org
Web: www.ncadp.org
Hosts annual conference and leads advocacy efforts.

Southern Center for Human Rights
83 Poplar Street, NW
Atlanta, GA 30303
Phone: (404) 688-1202
E-mail: rights@schr.org
Web: www.schr.org
Represents people facing the death penalty.

We witness to all people that violence [including capital punishment] is not the will of God.
CONFESSION OF FAITH IN A MENNONITE PERSPECTIVE (1995)