

Christianity and the Death Penalty

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According to the 2016 Encyclopedia Britannica Book of the Year, "32.9 percent of the population of the world are classified as Christian adherents." Out of the world of over seven billion people that is close to two and a half billion Christian adherents.

Frequently over the years I've observed Brothers and Sisters of the Christian faith genuinely struggle with the validity of the death penalty. Christians are born into a faith that instructs them to, "love God with all their hearts, souls, and minds; and to love their neighbor as themselves." As well as to forgive one another. Nevertheless, as members of some of this world's societies, they are asked to kill their neighbors for certain crimes. What does God think about the death penalty? How should Christians of the world view it?

These were several of the questions broadcasted throughout the United States of America in February of 1998. The State of Texas, USA, was about to execute its first woman in 135 years. Karla Faye Tucker had become a Christian while on death row waiting for her appeals to run their course.

The news reported that people of that nation's society were asking if it were appropriate to execute someone that had become a Christian. Provoking nationwide debate over the question. Ultimately the media reported that the Clergy, consisting of notable Preachers around the country, expressed that "God is pro-death penalty." A declaration that calmed the rising discomfort over executing Karla Faye Tucker.

A primary source of the Christian faith is rooted in the word of God that is contained in the bible. Making the bible a logical place to search for the answer to those previous questions.

My intentions are not to judge the Clergy, after all it is clear from the bible that God is pro-death penalty for certain crimes. However, God has provided Christians with specific rules for the application of the death penalty.

There are two rules and a principle of significance that supply Christians with information about God's will concerning how He expects the death penalty to be applied.

We find these rules in the old testament books of the bible called Deuteronomy and Numbers. These are books where the law of God was spoken about.

First among these rules for the application of the death penalty, Christians are instructed that the death penalty can only be administered if the accused has been found guilty by the testimony of two or three witnesses. Deuteronomy 17;6 decrees, "at the mouth of two or three witnesses shall the person worthy of death be put to death." Deuteronomy 19;5 explains, "one witness shall not rise up against a person for any iniquity... at the mouth of two or three witnesses shall a matter be established." The book of Numbers puts it in no uncertain terms as well, "Whosoever kills any person shall be put to death by the mouth of witnesses, but one witness shall not testify against any person to cause them to die." (Numbers 35;30)

The second rule God has established for the application of the death penalty is again found in Deuteronomy. It simply decrees, "The hands of the witnesses shall be the first upon the accused, to put them to death." (Deuteronomy 17;7)

We see from these passages that to just say that God is pro-death penalty is not representing the complete truth about God. God has provided rules to regulate the application of the death penalty. I've lived in the USA my entire life and I don't know of one of the states that honors those rules for applying the death penalty. Nor have I heard of any other country that honors them.

Furthermore God has given a principle for the motivation of applying the death penalty. He explains the purpose of the death penalty is, "so you shall put evil away from among you." (Deuteronomy 17;7 KJV)

When I observe the various sources of news media referring to people's opinions about invoking the death penalty, I notice the standard opinion is hate based, one of revenge, and not in agreement with God's motive.

There's a relevant story in the new testament of the bible. It is a story where Jesus Christ is confronted with the validity of the death penalty. In John 8;1-11 a group of religious men called Scribes (scribers of the law) and Pharisees (legalistic and separatistic group who strictly kept - their interpretation of - the mosaic law) brought a woman before Jesus. They told him they had caught this woman in the act of adultery. They went on to insist that the law allowed them to stone her to death for her crime. Then asked Him what he thought about it. Jesus responded by saying, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." (It's noteworthy that 1 John 3;4 defines sin as the transgression of God's law). The passage explains that the accusers were all convicted in their conscience [of sin], and walked away.

Now the fact is, according to the law, adultery was punishable by death, and obviously they had sufficient witnesses to convict. So clearly, they were correct. However, one of the points Gods wants us to understand from this passage is that His purpose for invoking the death penalty was to "put evil away from among you." His intentions were not to allow transgressors of his law to use the law to justify executing other people.

I hope I have put some perspective on the matter for you. God gave specific rules for the application of the death penalty. Moreover His motive for instituting it was righteous. Rules and a motive that are not honored in the world. Shouldn't Christians faithfully honor God's will, and His motive for the death penalty? Furthermore is it appropriate for faithful Christians to vote in favor of a non-God honoring death penalty? Should Christians condone the death penalty if it violates God's established rules and motives?