Christian Reasons to Oppose the Death Penalty

Mainstream and Conservative Christian Theology Strongly Opposes the Death Penalty

Presentation to the Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation's
Committee for Alternatives to the Death Penalty

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1. Jesus' two direct experiences with the death penalty

Jesus confronted the death penalty directly and explicitly twice in his life, and both times he rejected it.

(A) The woman being stoned

John 8:1-11 says: Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came to the temple, and all the people came to him. He sat down and taught them. The scribes and Pharisees brought him a woman who had been caught committing adultery. They set her in the midst and said to him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses in the law commanded us that she should be stoned, but what do you say? They said this to tempt him so they might be able to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and wrote on the ground with his finger, as though he had not heard them. So when they continued asking him, he lifted himself up and said to them, Whoever among you is without sin should cast the first stone at her. And again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. When they heard this, they were convicted by their own consciences, and they went out one by one, until only Jesus and the woman were left. When Jesus got up he saw nobody but the woman, and he said to her, Woman, where are your accusers? Does no man condemn you? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said to her, Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more.

Some points are important to note:

- The people wanted to carry out an execution according to their law. This was not a lynching, but a lawful execution.
- The people who brought the case to Jesus were the Pharisees, the Jewish group that focused on obeying the law strictly, and the scribes, who also were legalists. They directly challenged Jesus to obey the law that Moses, the Jewish law-giver, had prescribed.
- The culture imposed serious rankings of social status, and it relied heavily on notions of "purity" *vs*. "impurity" (or "clean" *vs*. "unclean") to assign and enforce social status. Men outranked women. (For example, note that the man with whom this woman was committing adultery was not held accountable – only the woman.) Jews outranked foreigners. People with disabilities were considered ritually "unclean," and the poor deserved their poverty. But throughout his ministry, Jesus kept breaking these barriers. He treated with respect and equality everyone he met, including women, non-Jews, children, poor people, and people with disabilities. He was

radically egalitarian and – in various stories and parables – he lifted up various individuals from despised groups as role models.

- In this story about the death penalty Jesus refused to buy into the notion that the "righteous" could execute the "unrighteous." He put everybody on the same level. He said that nobody could perform an execution unless the executioners themselves were sinless.
- At the end of the story, Jesus explicitly said he did not condemn the woman. Instead, he urged her to start living ethically. He rejected any kind of punishment altogether (no death penalty, no "life without parole," no jail time, and not even a small financial fine or any kind of penance). He just urged rehabilitation.

(B) Jesus' own execution under the law

Jesus was the victim of a pre-meditated first degree murder. There was pre-meditation and planning – even a conspiracy. If this were to happen in modern America, a prosecutor might seek the death penalty for the people who murdered Jesus.

But the people who murdered Jesus were not prosecuted, so they did not get the death penalty.

Ironically, only Jesus got the death penalty.

All four of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) tell the story of Jesus' execution under Roman law. When the Roman Empire occupied an area they imposed the empire's power upon the existing cultural setting in such a way as to clearly dominate but without upsetting the local power structure too much. Jesus lived in an area occupied by the Roman army with an overlay of Roman law imposed upon the already existing system. Although the narrative explained that the religious establishment was jealous of Jesus as a rival to their power, the narrative also explains how the Roman government gave permission for the execution to proceed. The Roman military conducted the execution and supervised crowd control. Crucifixion was a Roman method of execution, not a Jewish one. This was not a lynching, but rather a lawful execution by the government. It was the death penalty 2,000 years ago.

So what did Jesus, the innocent victim, say about the people who were murdering him? Did he call for revenge? Did he call for his murderers to be arrested, prosecuted, and executed for murdering him? No. He asked God to forgive them. That's it. Just forgive them.

Thus, on both occasions when Jesus directly encountered the death penalty, he rejected it. In both cases he refused to condemn the persons who might be considered guilty. In both cases he practiced forgiveness.

Anyone who claims to be a Christian should consider these direct teachings carefully.

2. Other biblical insights into murder and the death penalty

The Bible offers several other interesting insights into murder and the death penalty. Here are just a few:

- Moses killed an Egyptian and had to flee to avoid capture. God did not hold it against him. Instead, God later chose Moses – a murderer – to lead God's people out of Egypt.
- Early in the Christian era, Saul of Tarsus was a notorious persecutor of Christians, and he was a key leader in the killing of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. God did not hold it against him. Instead, God chose Saul to become the apostle Paul and become the leading missionary for the young Church and the author of several books of the New Testament.
- Many people who support the death penalty say that Jesus had talked about "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." But they don't finish talking about what Jesus was really saying. The quotation came from the Hebrews' early efforts to create a more humane society than the ones around them. When they moved into the Promised Land they were surrounded by societies that urged revengeful escalations of violence. So if you break my arm, my family can break both or your arms. Exodus 21:24 imposes a reform of doing only an equal amount of injury, rather than to escalate it as the neighboring tribes did.

- But Jesus went further. Instead of retaliating to the same extent, he commanded people to de-escalated. Referencing his people's scriptures, he said, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you …" and he proceeds to lay out many ways of de-escalating conflicts, loving our enemies, doing good for people who hurt us, and so forth. (Matthew 5:38-48)
- Why do so many people quote "an eye for an eye" out of context? Do they really not know what Jesus was talking about? Or are they grasping for some biblical justification for their own feelings of revenge?
- The 1981 Washington State Legislature changed the method of execution. On March 1, 1981, I wrote a letter to the editor that said: "Instead of changing the method of execution from hanging to lethal injection, why not use crucifixion? In Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus points out that what we do to prisoners we are really doing to Him. If the good people of our state insist upon executing prisoners, let's at least be honest enough to admit what we are really doing and Who we are really doing it to."

3. The basic Christian principles of forgiveness and grace

Mainstream and conservative Christianity teaches that everyone is a sinner, and God can forgive anyone. Nobody is beyond the reach of God's love and mercy. Even the worst sinners can be redeemed. Jesus and Saint Paul emphasized this. Theologians, preachers and hymn writers have been talking about this for 2,000 years.

But Christians forget about this when they allow the death penalty.

Christianity says that Jesus died for our sins. But the death penalty says that Jesus was irrelevant. You have to die for your own sins. The death penalty is a massive rejection of the most basic Christian teaching.

Many parts of the Bible talk about how God sets the time for things. The third chapter of Ecclesiastes begins with the famous verses affirming that "for every thing there is a season." Many other parts of the Old Testament and New Testament say that we do not know – and cannot know – God's timetable. Who can know when someone who has committed a murder might repent and be saved? Executing a person denies that person the opportunity to repent and be saved. What an affront to God! What a denial of God's plan for that person!

The Rev. Murphy Davis is an ordained Presbyterian minister. She wrote this in the Christian magazine The *Other Side* (June 1987, article on pages 10-13):

> "If you're going to care about life, you've got to care even when it's guilty life….
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> "God loves the guilty. In the Bible, Paul says there's not a doggone one of us who has not sinned to the point where we don't deserve a sentence of death. Not one of us. And the only reason we didn't get the chair is because Jesus stepped in for us. Jesus took the chair so we were spared. We are that guilty.
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> "Jesus says if you want to talk about murder, look at your own heart. Do you nurse a grudge against your neighbor? You are a murderer. There's this leveling kind of process in the gospel; so if you're going to start talking about guilt, don't start drawing big lines. Don't start saying there's something alien in those people on death row."

4. Quotations

"If Moses is our lawgiver [Old Testament prophet given laws by God] at this time let us obey him, not in part only, but wholly, and put every Sabbath breaker, blasphemer, and adulterer to death."

--Abolitionist in the 1840s

"We oppose the death penalty not just for what it does to those guilty of heinous crimes, but for what it does to all of us: it offers the tragic illusion that we can defend life by taking life."

-- Most Rev. Joseph A. Fiorenza, President, National Conference of Catholic Bishops / U.S. Catholic Conference, 1999.

"I don't believe that Jesus would have supported the death penalty."

-- President Jimmy Carter

"No man has the right to take God's place and say another man should die. It destroyed my life."

-- Perry Cobb, who spent 8 years on death row in Illinois for a crime he did not commit. He was exonerated in 1987.

"The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. ... In fact, violence merely increases hate. ... Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars."

-- Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

As one whose husband and mother-in-law have died the victims of murder assassination, I stand firmly and unequivocally opposed to the death penalty for those convicted of capital offenses. An evil deed is not redeemed by an evil deed of retaliation. Justice is never advanced in the taking of a human life. Morality is never upheld by a legalized murder.

-- Corretta Scott King

"When you execute someone, you destroy the very basis of being an ethical person yourself."

-- Bishop Thomas J. Gumbleton, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Detroit, Michigan.

"Thou shalt not kill."

-- God

5. Resources:

The Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation's Committee for Alternatives to the Death Penalty will be offering study/discussion sessions in local faith communities. We will be using materials developed by the United Church of Christ and by the Roman Catholic Church. Contact several members of our committee for these excellent resources.

Various religious denominations and other organizational bodies have adopted statements opposing the death penalty. Check their websites and other search methods to find them.

Amnesty International, the widely respected human rights organization, strongly opposes the death penalty. For a number of years AI organized a campaign called "Lighting the Torch of Conscience" and also an October "National Weekend of Faith in Action" that helped people of faith focus on abolishing the death penalty. Amnesty International offers resources to help the religious community address the death penalty. See http://www.amnestyusa.org/death-penalty/faith-in-action/page.do?id=1104336