

# Salt & Light

Spring 2003

The Newsletter of the Social Concerns Ministry Team

You are the salt of the earth...  
You are the light of the world...

*Educating and informing the church body in light of biblical principles*

*Mt. 5:13-14*

## Editorial Note:

We've heard a lot recently about former Illinois Governor George Ryan's change of mind regarding capital punishment. He is not the only person to be conflicted about this issue, nor to change his views over time. Whether or not the government and legal system should be given the power to take someone's life is an issue on which the United States has not reached consensus. In 37 states the death penalty is allowed; in 13 others it's banned. WBC does not espouse a particular position on this issue. Accordingly, the Social Concerns Ministry Team brings you articles in this newsletter representing both sides of the debate, to better inform your own views on capital punishment, and to encourage you to incorporate those views into your Christian worldview as you live as informed citizens and as salt & light in this world.

## Christ's Love and the Death Penalty

**From: David Anderson, *The Death Penalty: A Defense***

There are many scriptures in the New Testament concerning love and forgiveness. Do they say anything concerning the death penalty? To the state governed by law – no. To the Christian Church – yes. All words by Jesus concerning love, mercy and forgiveness make it impossible for the death penalty to be practiced within the framework of the Christian Church. To a Christian, in his everyday life, capital punishment totally goes against Christ's message of love. It also goes against prison sentencing and fines. It goes against the whole state governed by law with its judges and jurors who sentence their fellow men.

But, and it is incredibly important to see and understand this, Christ's message of love concerning turning the other cheek, forgiving your fellow man, etc. is not an issue concerning the state governed by law but us as individuals in our everyday lives. No verse in the Bible concerning love and

forgiveness and not passing judgment was, by Jesus, meant for the "authority", the punishing authority, the judicial system.

Each and everyone who feels that the thief, the robber, the drunk driver, the rapist or the murderer should receive mercy and forgiveness according to Jesus' teaching of love and therefore in no way have any form of punishment – such a person revokes law and

order, that which constitutes democratic civilized society.

When the New Testament was written – a few decades

after Jesus' death and resurrection – we find nothing in any letter of the New Testament that says that law and order must be abandoned or revised by the authorities because of the atonement's message of love. The authority, with the right to punish, was completely accepted in the NT as a divine ordinance (Rom 13:1-7, 1 Pet 2:13-14). Both Paul and Peter accepted the authority's punishing function and role, despite

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## Christ's Love and the Death Penalty

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the fact that they lived in a time where the punishments were many and severe and the death penalty was very common.

We repeat: Christian ethics teach that in God's Church mercy goes before right. A Christian is called to have as the ideal to live in reconciliation, forgiveness and love with their fellow men, even their enemies. According to Christian ethics judgment, revenge and retaliation is not allowed between people in everyday life.

But the rules are different for the authority...the authority is called by God to judge, and sometimes to pass severe judgments.

There is no country in the world that during the course of history has interpreted Jesus' teaching of love

to also include the courts and trials, and that Christ's teaching of forgiveness and love should be written in the law concerning criminals. A sound awareness has been that this would be the end of the state governed by law, and in the long run it would cause lawlessness and an increased spread of evil in society. The foundation of the civilized society would fall apart.

The great teachers of the Bible could separate where love belonged and where justice belonged. To them reality did not exclude either of these two great things. Here are three examples: Moses could, in the midst of a legal context, declare: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18). But in the next chapter there are several types of death penalties decreed. Jesus encouraged love and forgiveness between people, but at the same time accepted the punishing authority (Matt 15:3-4, 26:52, John 19:10-11). In Rom 12:17-21 Paul speaks of the relationship between

people. The text says that we must not avenge each other but give the revenge to God. Only a few verses later (Rom 13:1-6) Paul speaks of the authority, the judging authority, which on the other hand is "an agent of wrath" (v 4). The great personalities of the Bible can both join and keep apart the Law and the Love without creating any discrepancies.

The Christian Church has believed and taught this view throughout all times. It was not until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that new sounds from parts of Christianity began to be heard, i.e. through different documents where one, using Jesus' message of love as a foundation, disassociates from the death penalty. As a consequence one disqualifies the authority's right to judge and punish. This would have catastrophic consequences to, among other things, justice, human value, goodness and the moral order in society if this new, naive, and non-biblical view were followed. †

## Capital Punishment and a Pro-Life Ethic

**From: John and Paul Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World***

Mercy can always be extended by God when he wants, but man cannot presume to know when that is. Moreover, abuses associated with capital punishment as practiced today suggest a need for revision of its application, not elimination of it altogether. For example, errors in conviction underscore a need for more stringent regulations governing convictions in capital cases. Discrimination against the poor and minorities argues for revamping our judicial systems so as to remove those abuses as well. None of this, however,

nullifies the need or the warrant to practice the death penalty.

Can one consistently argue against abortion and euthanasia and espouse capital punishment? We think so on at least three grounds: a sanctity of life ethics, a demand to treat all persons justly, and a commitment to non-consequentialist ethics. Given a sanctity of life ethic, human life is sacred and must be protected. Hence, abortion and euthanasia are ruled out. Execution of murderers underscores the sanctity of life and the seriousness of taking the life of others. As to justice, the unborn, the

aged, and the infirm have done nothing deserving of death. The convicted murderer has. Justice demands rejecting abortion and euthanasia and executing murderers.

Finally, on a non-consequentialist theory of ethics such as ours, God prescribes the protection of the innocent and the punishment of those who take life. If one follows these divine commands, he will have to reject abortion and euthanasia and favor capital punishment. †

# The Pacifist Perspective of John Howard Yoder

**From: John and Paul Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World***

John Yoder claims that those who favor capital punishment frequently employ an inconsistent hermeneutic in their interpretation of Scripture. They affirm the finality of Christ and the New Covenant, but they still appeal to the OT when it comes to issues of civil order such as capital punishment. Moreover, use of the OT itself is inconsistent. Proponents of capital punishment accept OT laws about executing murderers, but reject laws which prescribe execution of animals (Gen 9:5; Exod 21:28), witches, adulterers, and disobedient children (Exod 22:18; Lev 20:10; Exod

21:15,17). Moreover, they ignore rules about cities of refuge for unintentional killers, and they do not require the executioner in cases of manslaughter to be the victim's

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next of kin (Gen 9:5). If the Mosaic Law is to be obeyed, why not mandate its injunctions on the Sabbath, the cure for leprosy,

slavery, or not wearing wool and linen garments together (Deut 22:11)? If none of these injunctions are for today, why single out capital punishment from the OT?

Defenders of capital punishment have no clear hermeneutic for determining which parts of the OT apply today and which parts do not.

Second, in interpreting the OT's relevance for today, one must remember that there is no theocracy in the NT era. In OT Israel ethnic, civil, and geographic and religious communities were one. Today the people of God are from many ethnic groups, and government is in the hands of pagan authorities. The

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# What's Wrong with Capital Punishment

**From: The U.S. Catholic Bishops' Statement on Capital Punishment**

We maintain that abolition of the death penalty would promote the values that are important to us as citizens and as Christians.

First, abolition sends a message that we can break the cycle of violence, that we need not take life for life, that we can envisage more humane and more hopeful and effective responses to the growth of violent crime.

Second, abolition of capital punishment is also a manifestation of our belief in the unique worth and dignity of each person from the moment of conception, a creature made in the image and likeness of God.

Third, abolition of the death penalty is further testimony to our

conviction, a conviction which we share with the Judaic and Islamic traditions, that God is indeed the Lord of life.

Fourth, we believe that the abolition of the death penalty is most consonant with the example of Jesus, who taught and practiced the forgiveness of injustice and who came "to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

With respect to the difficulties inherent in capital punishment, we note first that the infliction of the

death penalty extinguishes possibilities for reform and rehabilitation for the

person executed as well as the opportunity for the criminal to make some creative compensation for the evil he or she has done.

Second, the imposition of capital punishment involves the

possibility of mistake.

Third, the legal imposition of capital punishment in our society involves long and unavoidable

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## The Pacifist Perspective of John Howard Yoder

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whole context of social and ethical thought has so changed that a simple transposition of OT laws is both impossible and illegitimate.

Finally, Yoder claims that the function of capital punishment as stated in a passage such as Genesis 9 is not defense of society but expiation of a sin against the image of God. Of course, in the NT era Christ's sacrifice abolished all expiatory sacrifices. There is no further need for any blood sacrifices to expiate sin, including the sacrifice of one who has committed a murder. †

## What's Wrong with Capital Punishment

*(Continued from page 3)*

delays, which diminishes the effectiveness of capital punishment as a deterrent, for it makes the death penalty uncertain and remote.

Fourth, we believe that the actual carrying out of the death penalty brings with it great and avoidable

anguish for the criminal, for his family and loved ones, and for those who are called on to perform or to witness the execution.

Fifth, in the present situation of dispute over the justifiability of the death penalty and at a time when executions have been rare, executions attract enormous publicity, much of it unhealthy, and stir considerable acrimony in public discussion.

Sixth, there is a widespread belief that many convicted criminals are sentenced to death in an unfair and discriminatory manner. †

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