

Capital Punishment?

Chuck Northrop

Citizens have a responsibility to their respective governments. To the Romans, Paul wrote, “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God” (Romans 13:1). Peter also wrote, “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well” (1 Peter 2:13-14). Most of us recognize our responsibility to government and to obey the laws of the land. In reference to this, an often asked question arises concerning capital punishment: “Can we support capital punishment or vote for a candidate who supports capital punishment?” As with all questions of this nature, it must be answered in light of the holy scriptures and not in “I think...” or “I believe...” So, “what saith the Scriptures?”

From 1 Peter 2:13-14, government exists for two reasons: “for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well.” This is further explained in Romans 13:2 which says, “Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.” Not only do the inspired writers reveal the purpose governments serve, they also reveal two reasons for obeying governing authorities: first, to avoid punishment and, second, “for conscience sake,” because to resist the government is to resist the ordinance of God. Please also notice this fact: punishment is and should be a deterrent to crime. In verse 4, Paul continues, “For he [i.e. the one in governmental authority - CN] is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.” In other words, governments are God’s ministers or servants for the avenging of “wrath upon him that doeth evil.”

One way in which ancient governments inflicted punishment was by the sword. The sword was an emblem or symbol of authority to inflict the death penalty. The sword is a useless tool for anything other than personal protection and/or to inflict wounds upon another person. Because this passage says, “for he (governments) beareth not the sword in vain,” the Bible clearly teaches capital punishment.

There should be no doubt in any Bible student’s mind that under the law of Moses,

the death penalty was demanded for many offenses. The death penalty, also, was given before the law of Moses. In Genesis 9:6, God said to Noah, “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man.”

In actuality, capital punishment is for the betterment of society. It is a deterrent to crime, and it protects people from further injuries due to the wickedness of a criminal who has been put to death. But more importantly, it is the means by which God revenges “him that doeth evil.” The Bible teaches, “Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord” (Romans 12:19). Capital punishment is God’s wrath upon evil doers carried out through His servants — the governments.

Therefore, God has sanctioned the death penalty in the days of Noah, in the Mosaic age, and in the New Testament age. We not only have the right to support capital punishment, we have the obligation and responsibility to support and defend what God teaches in His word — for governing authorities “beareth not the sword in vain.”