

# On Capital Punishment

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The death penalty has been a topic of much debate in recent years. A few years ago, some pressure groups (such as the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) were able to carry enough weight to succeed in having most (if not all) state death penalty statutes ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. In the minority of states that have since rewritten the death penalty codes, convicts who have been assessed the death penalty have been spared execution through constant appeals. Consequently, it has been many years since anyone was executed for a criminal act in the United States.

During the same period that the death penalty has become virtually illegal in our nation, punishment for lesser crimes has also been seriously softened. There seems to be little consistency at all in relating the punishment to the crime. News sources have carried records of persons convicted of murder or rape receiving lighter sentences (and being turned loose on society again in a few years) than those imposed upon "white collar" crimes that involved no violence at all. While the teeth of our criminal law have gradually decayed, the crime rate (especially violent crime) has spiraled.

The Bible has somewhat to say on this subject:

For rulers are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil. And wouldest thou have no fear of the power? Do that which is good and thou shalt have praise from the same: for he is a 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 a minister of God, an avenger for wrath to him that doeth evil (Rom. 13:3-4).

Admittedly, rulers sometimes abuse their power, but still it is clearly taught here that the concept of human government is ordained of God, and that in protecting good-doers and punishing evildoers they are servants of God. The respected R.L. Whiteside makes the following observation on this passage: "The sword, as here used, is a symbol of power – the power, or authority, to inflict the death penalty. The death penalty for certain crimes is one of God's fundamental requirements. Long before the law of Moses was given 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"(Gen. 9:6).

[**Note:** I wrote this article for and it was published in the August 1, 1974, edition of *Granbury Gospel*, weekly bulletin of the Church of Christ, Granbury, Texas, of which I was editor.]

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