

***Bringing You  
Closer to God  
His Love and Peace  
And Eternal Life***

**Every Person Dies in Their Flesh  
But Is It God's Plan  
That Any Person Has the Right  
To Take the Life  
Of Another Person?**

**CAPITAL PUNISHMENT  
PEOPLE KILLED  
BY OTHER PEOPLE  
Is It Right?**

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# CAPITAL PUNISHMENT (CP) and SCRIPTURE

## WHAT IS CP?

The logical place to begin is by defining CP. The 1983 edition of the American Heritage Dictionary defines CP as the death penalty. Certainly this is a concise definition but I prefer the definition from my 1899 edition of Webster's International Dictionary. It says that "CP" is having reference to or involving the head or life hence punishable by death.

This definition gives us an idea of the origin "CP? The word capital means head. Historically, a common means carrying out the death penalty was to sever the head from the body. John the Baptist life was ended in this way.

## BIBLE VERSES RELATED TO CP

**Genesis 9:6** - <sup>6</sup> *"Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind.*

**Leviticus 24:17-22** - <sup>17</sup> *"Anyone who takes the life of a human being is to be put to death. <sup>18</sup> Anyone who takes the life of someone's animal must make restitution—life for life. <sup>19</sup> Anyone who injures their neighbor is to be injured in the same manner: <sup>20</sup> fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury. <sup>21</sup> Whoever kills an animal must make restitution, but whoever kills a human being is to be put to death. <sup>22</sup> You are to have the same law for the foreigner and the native-born. I am the LORD your God."*

**Exodus 21:12** - <sup>12</sup> *"Anyone who strikes a person with a fatal blow is to be put to death..*

**John 8:3-11** - <sup>3</sup> *The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group <sup>4</sup> and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. <sup>5</sup> In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" <sup>6</sup> They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.*

*But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. <sup>7</sup> When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." <sup>8</sup> Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.*

<sup>9</sup> *At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. <sup>10</sup> Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"*

<sup>11</sup> *"No one, sir," she said.*

*"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin.*

**Numbers 35:30-31** - <sup>30</sup> *Anyone who kills a person is to be put to death as a murderer only on the testimony of witnesses. But no one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness. <sup>31</sup> "Do not accept a ransom for the life of a murderer, who deserves to die. They are to be put to death.*

**Romans 12:19** - <sup>19</sup> *Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.*

**Matthew 6:14-15** - <sup>14</sup> *For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. <sup>15</sup> But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

**Matthew 26:52** - <sup>52</sup> "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword."

**Romans 13:1-14** – <sup>1</sup> Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. <sup>2</sup> Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. <sup>3</sup> For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. <sup>4</sup> For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

<sup>6</sup> This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. <sup>7</sup> Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

<sup>8</sup> Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. <sup>9</sup> The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>10</sup> Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

<sup>11</sup> And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. <sup>12</sup> The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. <sup>13</sup> Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. <sup>14</sup> Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

**Ecclesiastes 8:11** - <sup>11</sup> When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, people's hearts are filled with schemes to do wrong.

**Ezekiel 33:11** - <sup>11</sup> Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?'

### **Matthew 5:43-48 - Love for Enemies**

<sup>43</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup> But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup> If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? <sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

**Exodus 20:13** - <sup>13</sup> "You shall not murder.

**Romans 13:9** - <sup>9</sup> The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

## **WHAT DOES SCRIPTURE TEACH ABOUT CP?**

The answer is “it’s complicated.” (If it weren’t, Christians wouldn’t still be debating the topic thousands of years later.) It’s a topic that requires distinguishing between *descriptive* Bible content (that simply describes, in a historical sense, the state of things in Bible times, without necessarily requiring it of believers today) and *prescriptive* Bible content (that imparts an authoritative command or guideline for Christians of all eras). There’s no easy answer, but there are Bible verses and questions to help with the issue.

CP was a significant feature in the justice system of Old Testament Israel. Execution was called for in response to extreme civil crimes like murder and rape, as well as for offenses against God’s holiness, like false prophecy and witchcraft. There were mechanisms in place to avert the death penalty in some situations, and God sometimes spared the lives of people whose actions, legally speaking, would have otherwise meant the death penalty [consider the Apostle Paul]. The establishment of CP in ancient Israel is often used to argue for the death penalty in modern times—and it seems reasonable to conclude that since God incorporated it into Israelite society, CP is not antithetical to His nature.

The death penalty was never employed arbitrarily or frivolously. In fact, observing the use of CP in the Old Testament actually shows us how precious human life is to God. Because human beings are image-bearers of God, murder was such a serious affront to both God and man that it had to be answered with the blood of the murderer. Genesis 9:6 suggests that this sense of justice is woven into the moral fabric of Creation:

*<sup>6</sup>“Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind. [Genesis 9:6]”*

Christians are well aware of the atoning power of blood, believing that Christ’s blood—shed at his execution on the cross—spares us from the spiritual “death penalty” that our sins would otherwise merit.

When applying these principles to our modern system of justice, however, we should be aware of the different context we live in. Ancient Israelite society was unique in that it was a true theocracy—God Himself crafted its laws. God clearly has the authority to save or condemn human lives, but does that authority still exist in a democratic government devised by fallible men and women?

The New Testament adds important context to the topic but doesn’t clearly instruct us one way or the other regarding the death penalty. The apostle Paul acknowledges that wielding “the sword” is a legitimate exercise of government authority—presumably he is referring to its duty to punish criminals, with violence if necessary. On the other hand, many of Jesus’ actions and words, such as his foiling of the execution of the adulterous woman, suggest that mercy and humility should stay society’s killing hand. And of course, no Christian is unaware of Jesus’ own experience with CP: he was the ultimate innocent victim of the government’s sword wielded unjustly.

Because the New Testament’s gospel of grace is held to have fulfilled the Old Testament law, it is worth questioning whether Old Testament CP—a powerful enforcer of that law—is a tool we should use today or whether it was appropriate only within the context of the Old Testament covenant. An over-arching theme of the New Testament is the undeserved forgiveness extended to us by a merciful God. As recipients of God’s grace, we are called to extend grace to others as well. How do we reconcile the need for justice with the importance of mercy and forgiveness? Do the requirements of justice trump the opportunity for mercy, or vice versa?

It would be much easier if God had chosen to clearly state one way or the other whether CP is a moral responsibility for modern representative governments. But for His own reasons, He has not done so—which means we must continue to wrestle with Scripture, prayerfully try to discern the best course of action, and respect other Christians doing the same. Regardless of our conclusions, Christians must make sure that Christlike values—justice, humility, and grace—motivate us, rather than vengeance or hate; and whether Christians choose to support or oppose CP, we are all called to make sure that it is carried out justly and does not target innocent people.

## **OLD TESTAMENT TEACHING ABOUT CP**

Very early in human history, God decreed that murderers were to forfeit their own lives: “Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he the man” (Genesis 9:6). This standard continued into the Mosaic period (cf. Numbers 35:33). As a matter of fact, the law God gave to Moses to regulate the Israelite nation made provision for at least sixteen capital crimes. In sixteen instances, the death penalty was to be invoked. The first four may be categorized as pertaining to civil matters.

1. Under the law of Moses, the death penalty was required in cases of **premeditated murder** (Exodus 21:12-14,22-23; Leviticus 24:17; Numbers 35:16-21). This regulation even included the situation in which two men might be fighting and, in the process, cause the death of an innocent bystander or her unborn infant. It did not include accidental homicide, which we call “manslaughter.”
2. **Kidnapping** was a capital crime under the Old Testament (Exodus 21:16; Deuteronomy 24:7). One movie, which was based on an actual incident, depicted the kidnapping of a seven-year-old boy as he was walking home from school. The man who stole him kept him for some seven years, putting the child through emotional and sexual abuse, before the boy, at age fifteen, was finally returned to his parents. He was a different child, and never again would be the same. God would not tolerate such a thing in the Old Testament, and much of the same would be stopped in America if such crimes were taken more seriously.
3. A person could be put to death for **striking or cursing one’s parents** (Exodus 21:15,17; Leviticus 20:9). Jesus alluded to this point in Matthew 15:4 and Mark 7:10.
4. **Incorrigible rebelliousness** was punishable by death (Deuteronomy 17:12). For example, a stubborn, disobedient, rebellious son who would not submit to parents or civil authorities was to be stoned to death (Deuteronomy 21:18-21).

The next six capital crimes can be identified as more specifically pertaining to religious matters.

5. **Sacrificing to false gods** was a capital crime in the Old Testament (Exodus 22:20).
6. **Violating the Sabbath** brought the death penalty (Exodus 35:2; Numbers 15:32-36).
7. **Blasphemy, or cursing God**, warranted the death penalty (Leviticus 24:10-16,23).
8. The **false prophet**, specifically one who tried to entice the people to idolatry, was to be executed (Deuteronomy 13:1-11), as were the people who were so influenced (Deuteronomy 13:12-18).

9. **Human sacrifice** was a capital crime (Leviticus 20:2). The Israelites were tempted to offer their children to false pagan deities, like Molech. But such was despicable to God.
10. **Divination**, or the dabbling in the magical arts, was a capital crime. Consequently, under Mosaic law, witches, sorcerers, wizards, mediums, charmers, diviners, spiritists, and enchanters were to be put to death (Exodus 22:18; Leviticus 19:26,31; 20:27; Deuteronomy 18:9-14).

The next six crimes pertain to sexual matters

11. **Adultery** was punishable by death under the Old Testament (Leviticus 20:10-21; Deuteronomy 22:22). Can you imagine what would happen in our own country if adultery brought the death penalty? Most of Hollywood would be wiped out, as well as a sizeable portion of the rest of our population!
12. **Bestiality**, i.e., having sexual relations with an animal, was punishable by death (Exodus 22:19; Leviticus 20:15-16).
13. **Incest** was a capital offense in the Old Testament (Leviticus 18:6-17; 20:11-12,14).
14. **Homosexuality** was a capital crime (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13).
15. **Premarital sex** brought the death penalty (Leviticus 21:9; Deuteronomy 22:20-21).
16. **Rape** of an engaged or married woman was a capital crime in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 22:25-27). Again, imagine what would happen in this country if rape brought the death penalty! Much of the unconscionable treatment of women now taking place would be terminated.

CP was written into God's will for the Jewish nation in the Old Testament. The death penalty was a viable form of punishment for at least sixteen separate offenses. Some people have misunderstood one of the Ten Commandments which says, "You shall not kill" (Exodus 20:13). They have assumed that the law forbade taking human life under any circumstances. But God **required** the death penalty for some sixteen crimes. Therefore, the commandment would have been better translated, "You shall not murder." In other words, the command was a prohibition against an individual taking the law into his own hands and exercising personal vengeance. But God wanted the execution of law breakers to be carried out by duly constituted legal authorities.

## **CP AND THE TEN COMMANDMENTS**

One of the first things that anti-CP supporters appeal to is the *sixth commandment*. The commandment says, "*Thou shalt not kill*" (**Ex. 20:13**). What does that mean? To answer that we have to look at the word "kill." The Hebrew word translated "kill" (*Strong's #7523*) in this verse is used 49 times in the Old Testament and in every relevant used means "to murder" especially with premeditation, according to biblical scholar Charles Ryrie. Further, when the sixth commandment is repeated in the New Testament a word is used that never means anything else than to murder

The Sixth Commandment clearly is a prohibition against murder; *not* an injunction against CP, the death penalty.

## WHAT IS THE BIBLICAL PENALTY FOR MURDER?

Look again at **Genesis 9:5-6**. God says to Noah and his family,

"<sup>5</sup> And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being. <sup>6</sup>“Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind. ”

These verses are simply saying, murder is forbidden. Man-killing animals are to be killed and any person who murders another is to be killed. Killing a man is an offense against almighty God for man is made in God's image.

The verses makes it clear. CP, the taking of the perpetrators life, is what God demands for the murder of a human being by man or beast. There are some other specifics that the Lord laid out relating to CP.

1. There must be two or more witnesses before one accused of murder can be put to death (**Numbers 35:30**)
2. A person judged guilty of murder must die. Do not allow any kind of bargain or ransom for his life. (**Num. 35:30**)
3. The blood of the victim murdered defiles the land. The only way it is cleansed is by administering CP to the murderer. (**Num. 35:33-34**).

### Further Explanation of Murder

Naturally, the individual(s) who carries out the CP for the lawful authority was not considered a murdered. Likewise, the killing of enemies in war is not considered murder. Additionally, killings judged accidental were not considered murder, though there may be other lesser penalties.

### CP AND THE LAW GIVEN TO MOSES

It should be noted that from Noah until the institution of the Law, the Bible only sanctioned CP for murder. When God gave the law to Moses, additional things were considered capital crimes worthy of death. These include...

- Hitting your parents -- **Ex. 21:15**
- Kidnapping -- **Ex 21:16**
- Cursing your father or mother -- **Ex 21:17**
- Killing an unborn infant -- **Ex 21:22-25** (There is some discussion about the interpretation of the passage. I believe it means if a woman has a miscarriage and the baby lives there can be lesser penalties. If the baby dies or the baby and the mother die the death penalty applies as the KJV & NIV translate the passage.)
- An animal that has the habit of injuring others and the owner does not destroy it -- **Exodus 21:28-29**
- Witchcraft -- **Ex. 22:18**
- Worship of other gods/goddesses -- **Ex. 22:20**
- Working on the Sabbath -- **Ex. 35:2**

- Adultery -- **Lev. 20:10**
- Incest -- **Lev. 20:11-12 & 14**
- Sodomy (homosexuality/lesbianism) -- **Lev. 20:13**
- Bestiality -- **Lev. 20:15-16**
- False prophesying -- **Deut. 13:1-10**
- Rape under some circumstances -- **Deut. 22:25**

There can be no doubt that the Old Testament teaches CP. It began by demanding it for murder and expanded its application under the Law given to Moses. Therefore, the principle of CP is well established.

## **NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING ABOUT CP**

Although the New Testament does not have any specific teachings about CP, Old Testament ideas of punishment are secondary to Jesus' message of love and redemption. Both reward and punishment are seen as properly taking place in eternity, rather than in this life.

Jesus said His mission was not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17-20). However, He and His apostles greatly modified our understanding of God's intentions. Love is the principle that must guide all our actions (Matthew 5:43-48, Mark 12:28-34, Luke 10:25-28, Romans 13:9-10, Galatians 5:14). Christians are bound by Jesus' commands to "Love the Lord your God" and "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:34-40). We are no longer bound by the harsh Old Testament Law (John 1:16-17, Romans 8:1-3, 1 Corinthians 9:20-21).

Jesus flatly rejected the Old Testament principle of taking equal revenge for a wrong done (Matthew 5:38-41, Luke 9:52-56). He also said that we are all sinners and do not have the right to pass judgment on one another (Matthew 7:1-5). In the case of a woman caught in adultery (a capital offense), Jesus said to those who wanted to stone her to death,

*<sup>7</sup> "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." <sup>8</sup> Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. <sup>9</sup> At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. <sup>10</sup> Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" <sup>11</sup> "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." (John 8:7-11)*

The apostle Paul also warned against taking revenge for a wrong done (Romans 12:17-21, 1 Thessalonians 5:15). Likewise, the apostle Peter warned us not to repay evil with evil (1 Peter 3:9).

No doubt that the Old Testament clearly teaches CP. But what about the New Testament?

First, Christ never condemned CP. In fact CP was unjustly carried out against him. If CP were looked upon with disdain by Christ, he had ample opportunity to speak out on the topic. In **Luke 23:41** the repentant thief said he and the other offender had justly receiving the death sentence but Christ was guiltless. "And we indeed [justly]; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss." Christ could have said to the repentant thief, "It does not matter what you have done, CP is wrong. It should be done away with." But, he did not say that when he had a golden opportunity to say it.

That brings us to the second incident that can shed some light of Jesus Christ's view of CP. We find this in **John 8:1-11**. This passage deals with the Pharisee's sting operation relating to the

adulterous woman. It was designed to trap Christ and make him reject the Law God had given to Moses or the Roman Law of the day. Christ did neither, but in fact invited those without sin to throw the first stone: "So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." (John 8:7) This is hardly a rejection of CP. Christ did recognize a set-up when he saw one though.

Scripture specifically says: <sup>13</sup> *Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority,* <sup>14</sup> *or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.* (1 Peter 2:13-14)

The prerogative of CP is established in **Genesis 9:6**, developed in the Mosaic law and reaffirmed in the New Testament. CP IS Biblical. It *is* for today.

The New Testament reveals God's will this side of the cross where the matter of CP is treated virtually the same as the Old Testament. The New Testament clearly teaches that CP is God's will for human civilization. Consider, for example:

<sup>1</sup> *Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.*

<sup>2</sup> *Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.* <sup>3</sup> *For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended.* <sup>4</sup> *For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.* <sup>5</sup> *Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.*

<sup>6</sup> *This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.* <sup>7</sup> *Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.* (Romans 13:1-7)

In Romans 13:1-4 the Christian is clearly taught to be in subjection to the governing authorities. This is a provision for harmony. Though a government may be oppressive, by the preaching of the gospel, governments are changed. But, as we look at verse four, we see the comment that the governing authority "bear(s) the sword" and that it is "an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil." The question is: what is meant by "bear the sword"? The word "**sword**" in this passage refers to CP. God wants duly constituted civil authority to invoke the death penalty upon citizens who commit crimes worthy of death.

The sword is a symbol of the power delegated to governing authorities to enforce acceptable social conduct. Here we have the biblical basis for the use of force by government for the maintenance of law and order. The power to punish has been delegated by God to those who rule. It is clear that the idea of CP is sufficiently included in the phrase, "bear the sword." After all, the sword is most definitely an instrument of discipline, and in the Roman culture, it killed.

Human government is ordained by God as stated in Romans 13:1-7: Here is what powers God sanctions for government:

1. The Power to tax - (6-7)
2. The power to enforce laws - (2-3)
3. The power of punishment for evil - (4)

The apostle Paul, himself, articulated the correct attitude when he stood before Porcius Festus and defended his actions by stating:

<sup>10</sup> Paul answered: “I am now standing before Caesar’s court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. <sup>11</sup> If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!” (Acts 25:10-11)

Paul was acknowledging that the state properly possesses the power of life and death in the administration of civil justice. The charges were serious enough to demand a death penalty. If the accusations were true, Paul said, he was willing to die. The right of appeal to the supreme power, in case of life and death, was secured by an ancient law to every Roman citizen, and continued under the empire. Paul does not deny the right of the state to execute people. Instead of denouncing CP, Paul assumes its validity and then appeals to Caesar (as was the right of Roman citizens when a crime worthy of death was levied).

These passages clearly affirm that the state—civil government—has the God-ordained responsibility to keep law and order, and to protect its citizens against evildoers.

Peter held the same position as that of Paul. He enjoined obedience to the government that has been sent by God “to punish those who do wrong” (1 Peter 2:14). Also “Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient” (Titus 3:1). Jesus implied the propriety of CP when He told the Parable of the Pounds. Those who rebelled against the king were to be brought and executed in his presence (Luke 19:27).

Although there is no place in the New Testament that specifically says that CP is right or wrong, these verses support it.—It seems clear that the New Testament does not denounce the idea of CP but instead assumes the right of the state to use it.

## IS CP RIGHT OR WRONG? IS IT NECESSARY?

The issue is tied into a number of contexts such as certain social factors and how they might apply today. Some have tried to find an implicit Scriptural reason to reject CP, but we will see below that such efforts take their cites out of context. On the other hand, one must carefully distinguish between saying that the Bible *mandates* CP and saying that it merely *permits* CP. This relates to an important sub-issue:

Examples of CP appear overwhelmingly in the OT law and it is prescribed for such things as adultery and witchcraft. So should we be enforcing it likewise today? Not on that basis.

We now have a new covenant or contract between Christ and the individual and the believer. The sins are paid for by Christ’s blood, and he takes on the punishment for the transgression of those who break God’s law **and accept his payment.**

The old covenant and our enmity with it are now abolished: <sup>15</sup> *by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace,* (Eph. 2:15). The non-believer is not covered by this, but nor does our new contract contain specifications of enforcement -- that is now God’s domain, with regard to each individual, on the basis of the new covenant terms.

On the other hand, when a superior writes a contract, even if you are not a party to it, the contract will still give you an idea what values the superior holds to. We no longer enforce the penalties, but we still know what actions displease God, and the NT does say that God has given authority to human governments. So, it is now up to those bodies to decide whether CP is necessary. So what is the role of the law here? It does tell us that God does approve CP as a means of justice, but should we use it today, and in what contexts? This moves us to this key point:

**Why did these laws demand the death penalty?** Many Skeptical arguments about the Bible and CP focus on this point, but such objections are out of order. Obeying such laws was once a matter of survival, of ensuring that what there was of civilization did not slip over that fine line from order into chaos. CP was a necessary element to social order and survival.

This naturally leads to a predominant point in the CP debate today. A primary pro-CP argument is that CP serves as a deterrent to crime. Anti-CP responses claim there is no evidence of a deterrent effect. The issue seems actually to miss a point.

The lack of deterrent effect may have something to do with that we don't see the death penalty as real in our minds. Executions are far removed from all but a few witnesses, and only one person pulls the switch or administers the drug. In contrast, CP by the OT law was enforced by the community picking up stones and taking part after the condemnation of guilt. One might suggest that the deterrent effect would be greater (and that we might be more cautious in other areas) were CP more in our face and personal, as it was for the Israelites.

**So what now threatens society?** In our present state, many of the OT crimes are not threats to society in a broader sense. Things like adultery mainly weaken a family unit, not society as a whole;. However, if enough people become adulterous that may change things in society as a whole. If a behavior like adultery *became* a threat to such an extent, one might argue that CP should be instituted for it at some point, but because our society is individualistic rather than collectivist, it is unlikely that that will ever happen.

Thoughtful determination has to be made in terms of what behaviors might threaten society to the level that CP is needed as a deterrent -- although CP as it now stands is not much of a deterrent at all.

## **ARE THERE ANY CITES IN THE BIBLE AGAINST CP?**

To be sure, some efforts have been made to find Biblical support for this position, but these have tended to commit "hermeneutical homicide" in the process:

*<sup>38</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' <sup>39</sup> But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. (Matthew 5:38-39)*

This is one of several passages cited of a type which encourages resisting evil, not taking revenge, and so on. But they are all in the context of **personal relationships** and have nothing to do with the judicial functions of society as a whole.

Certainly persons should forgive others who commit criminal acts against them, but this does not oblige the state to "forgive". If it did, then we could not even imprison a person or so much as exact a fine for a parking ticket.

*"Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness," (Genesis 1:26)*

The reasoning here is that being made in the image of God, we possess a certain dignity and CP is a violation of that. But the "image and likeness" has nothing to do with dignity; it has to do with our authority to represent God on earth and exercise the authority He has given us.

Genesis. 9:6 says: <sup>6</sup> *"Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind.* The value of the victim as the representative of God on earth is just cause for penal execution. Although, as a proverbial statement, it by no means *requires* execution.

Exodus 20:13 says **“You shall not murder”**. But this has no application to judicial execution.

CP is a difficult subject to discuss as there are many different opinions that all contain some truth about this issue. Some believe it is fair and just to administer the death penalty when criminals take a life or lives, while others think that it is cruel and unusual punishment for civilized societies. Many Christians are divided on this issue as well, with some following the Old Testament law of CP and others choosing the seemingly gentler side of the Bible—the New Testament—as the basis for their opposition to this law. Are these two Testaments in opposition to each other? God does not contradict Himself.

### The Origin of CP

Where did the idea of CP come from? The first definition in the Webster’s New World Dictionary for the word “capital” is: 1) Involving or punishable by death (originally by decapitation) (a capital offense). Decapitation was the beheading of those who were convicted of any crime deserving the death penalty (thus Capital comes from the Latin word “capitalis” which means “of the head”). Murder, treason and other high crimes were punishable by death. Usually the state or governments set the standards for carrying out this punishment. However, before governments established this practice, the idea of CP was first instigated by God in the Old Testament in the Bible.

*<sup>5</sup>And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being. <sup>6</sup>“Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind. (Genesis 9:5-6)*

*<sup>17</sup>“Anyone who takes the life of a human being is to be put to death. <sup>18</sup> Anyone who takes the life of someone’s animal must make restitution—life for life. <sup>19</sup> Anyone who injures their neighbor is to be injured in the same manner: <sup>20</sup> fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury. <sup>21</sup> Whoever kills an animal must make restitution, but whoever kills a human being is to be put to death. <sup>22</sup> You are to have the same law for the foreigner and the native-born. I am the LORD your God.”(Leviticus 24:17-22)*

### **Why Did God Institute CP?**

Why would a loving God who is supposed to love all of mankind issue these edicts? To answer this question, we must understand the overall purpose of God. In Genesis 9:5-6 it can be seen that God’s command was based on the dignity of man, as he is made in the image of God. God created the first humans, and told them to be fruitful and multiply. God desired not only to have fellowship with them, but with all subsequent generations. However, to be able to have real communion with a human, God created them with free will. Humans are given the right to choose if they want to commune with and love and obey God or if they would rather choose to live apart from God, and reject and disobey Him.

God knows that when He created humans with free wills that not all would follow and obey Him. However, He knows that many will want to love and serve Him. In giving humans free will, He also had to establish laws for them to live by. The Ten Commandments in **Exodus 20:1-17** shows that these laws are given for the good of humanity. One of these laws is in **verse 13: “You shall not murder”**. Why does God say “do not murder,” and also decrees that a murderer should be put to death. The reason is that the word “murder” means “to slay someone in a violent manner unjustly.”

## God Sanctions Government Authorities to Enforce Laws

God sets boundaries on mankind by establishing ruling authorities that will make and enforce the laws He gives. The purpose for this was because He knows that unregenerate society, without any restraints, will seek to destroy good humans. God's desire is that all humans will come to Him and live by His laws. However, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and broke His law, sin entered into the world and was passed down to all of mankind through them. God, in His love for mankind, made a way for men to come back to Him, through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus. Because Jesus lived free of sin and obeyed the law of God perfectly, He became the sin offering and died upon a cross, thus paying the price for all sin. He then rose from the dead the third day showing that He indeed was the son of God. Now those who accept what Jesus did and repent of their sins can find their way through faith to be reconciled to God. This sacrifice covers and cleanses humans even from the worst of sins including murder. As with the Apostle Paul], now, through Christ, even murderers can be forgiven and restored to a relationship with God so they can live forever with Him.

Problems are with the two sides of CP in that really both sides hold the truth of God. God's law of justice for the taking of a life demands that life be taken; yet, God's spiritual law of mercy and forgiveness grants that a murderer can be forgiven and restored through Christ. How can we reconcile this? We must understand that God instituted civil authorities to maintain order in the earth. God uses them to restrain evil and they should be obeyed for this purpose. In the New Testament, we see that even Jesus surrendered to the governing authorities because He was submitted to God.

*<sup>11</sup> Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."(John 19:11)*

*<sup>1</sup> Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. <sup>2</sup> Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. <sup>3</sup> For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. <sup>4</sup> For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience. (Romans 13:1-5)*

From these verses, we see that governments can elect to practice CP, the harshest form of punishment. It is enforced in the United States today.

## WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT CP AND THE DEATH PENALTY

### Frequently Asked Questions

- Does the Bible say murderers, rapists and other criminals should be put to death?
- Do the Old Testament laws about CP (the death penalty) apply to Christians?
- Does "Thou shalt not kill" in the Ten Commandments mean the death penalty is wrong?
- Did Jesus teach that CP is wrong when He showed mercy to the one caught in adultery?
- Do Jesus' teachings against revenge mean CP is wrong?

## The Old Testament

The Old Testament Law prescribed the death penalty for an extensive list of crimes including:

- Murder (Exodus 21:12-14; Leviticus 24:17,21)
- Attacking or cursing a parent (Exodus 21:15,17)
- Disobedience to parents (Deuteronomy 21:18-21)
- Kidnapping (Exodus 21:16)
- Failure to confine a dangerous animal, resulting in death (Exodus 21:28-29)
- Witchcraft and sorcery (Exodus 22:18, Leviticus 20:27, Deuteronomy 13:5, 1 Samuel 28:9)
- Human sacrifice (Leviticus 20:2-5)
- Doing work on the Sabbath (Exodus 31:14, 35:2, Numbers 15:32-36)
- Incest (Leviticus 18:6-18, 20:11-12,14,17,19-21)
- Adultery (Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22)
- Homosexual acts (Leviticus 20:13)
- Prostitution by a priest's daughter (Leviticus 21:9)
- Blasphemy (Leviticus 24:14,16, 23)
- False prophecy (Deuteronomy 18:20)
- Perjury in capital cases (Deuteronomy 19:16-19)
- Refusing to obey a decision of a judge or priest (Deuteronomy 17:12)
- False claim of a woman's virginity at time of marriage (Deuteronomy 22:13-21)
- Sex between a woman pledged to be married and a man other than her betrothed (Deuteronomy 22:23-24)

## NUMEROUS LAW IN THE USA FOUNDED ON BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES

Even the specific laws here in the United States that determine guilt or innocence, are also found in the Bible. In fact, they were established by our forefathers, many who were godly Christians who read and obeyed the Word of God. Many of these laws are listed in **chapters 21, 22 and 23** in the book of **Exodus** and **Numbers 35:15-34**. In reading these chapters, you will note that God makes a distinction between the penalties for manslaughter (usually killing in self-defense or by accident without malice) and murder (premeditated vengeful killing or violent killing with anger and malice). Our courts require that a murderer can only be convicted if there is sufficient evidence and witnesses to the crime. This too, comes from the Bible.

Under our government mandates, the use of the death penalty, as intended by law, is to reduce the number of violent murders by eliminating some of the repeat offenders; thus it is being used as a system of justice, not just a method of deterrence. Opponents of the death penalty argue that although it is said to exist as a crime deterrent, it really isn't. Some modern supporters of CP no longer view the death penalty as a deterrent, but as a just punishment for the crime. This is a shift from the attitudes of past generations. Supporters of the death penalty say it would be a deterrent to crime if punishment was done more speedily (this of course, immediately after conviction).

The Bible says that God never rejoices at the death of the wicked nor are we..

*<sup>11</sup> Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die...?' (Ezekiel 33:11)*

*<sup>30</sup> "Anyone who kills a person is to be put to death as a murderer only on the testimony of witnesses. But no one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness.*

*<sup>31</sup> "Do not accept a ransom for the life of a murderer, who deserves to die. They are to be put to death. (Numbers 35:30-31)*

## **God Desires Justice & Fairness**

Some contend that their path to death row is paved by poor representation from a lawyer or a legal system that discriminates. Some also insist they did not commit the murder.

Though man may make mistaken judgements, God does not. He never condones a judgement based on anything other than truth or justice. God is no respecter of persons and He desires that all receive a fair and just trial no matter what their social status may be.

*<sup>34</sup> Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism <sup>35</sup> but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. (Acts 10:34-35)*

## **Is the Judicial System Flawed or Fair?**

Though our justice system is flawed in ways, due to sinful and imperfect persons who are in it, there are many checks and balances to keep innocent people from being executed wrongly:

1. The criminal trial itself, by a jury of 12 impartial people.
2. Evidence must be produced to show guilt beyond a shadow of doubt.
3. Judge must agree that a trial is fair and can order new trials for irregularities.
4. A blood testing system (DNA Genetic Testing) to determine guilt or innocence in murder cases, when applicable, is now available.

As Christians, we must pray that honest, fair and godly persons will be selected to serve as judges, wardens, and other positions that operate our judicial and penal systems. This is one of the greatest deterrents for people being wrongly charged with all crimes. Even though the possibility exists for the innocent to be executed unjustly, the alternative is far worse. If evil persons are allowed to go unpunished, evil will eventually take over. If we want a fair judicial system we must work at changing it by prayer, involvement, serving, voting, etc. Complaining about the system will never change it. Change must begin in us.

## **The Issue of Forgiveness versus Punishment**

As Christians, how do we then deal with this issue of CP, especially if we are involved or know someone personally on death row that we feel is innocent? Or perhaps the person was someone like Karla Faye Tucker, who, although guilty, was totally changed and had lived a righteous and rehabilitated life in prison for 15 years. Karla had committed two horrible murders. Right after she went to jail a pastor visited her and led her to the saving knowledge of Jesus. From that time on she led an exemplary life and demonstrated a changed life and her Christian faith in prison. However, the State of Texas carried out its law to execute murderers and Karla. We are asked in the Bible to forgive Karla no matter what she has done.

*14 For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:14-15)*

Karla's last words were as follows:

To families of those she murdered: *"I am so sorry. I hope God will give you peace with this."*

To her family: *"Baby, I love you. Ron, give Peggy a hug for me. Everybody has been so good to me. I love all of you very much. I'm going to be face-to-face with Jesus now."*

To the Warden: *"Warden Baggett, thank all of you so much. You have been so good to me. I love all of you very much. I will see you all when you get there. I will wait for you."*

Here are excerpts of Karla speaking during a 700 Club Interview with Karla:

*"I asked God to forgive me and I knew I needed forgiveness. And I knew I had done something really horrible. But I think right at that moment what mostly hit me was His Love. His Love. It just surrounded me. He just put me in His arms and said, "I Love You"...(My purpose for this interview) is that lives would be saved, that lives would be touched that people would just come to know that no matter where they were He could touch them. He could change their life."*

Should not Karla have been granted clemency since she was no longer a threat to society (in fact, just the opposite was true)? She touched many peoples' lives in prison and they too were changed for the better. We know God is a forgiving God and we as His children must be forgiving also. Does God's Word address cases such as Karla Faye's? Yes, we find God's attitude toward her plight in this scripture:

*14 And if I say to a wicked person, 'You will surely die,' but they then turn away from their sin and do what is just and right— 15 if they give back what they took in pledge for a loan, return what they have stolen, follow the decrees that give life, and do no evil—that person will surely live; they will not die. 16 None of the sins that person has committed will be remembered against them. They have done what is just and right; they will surely live.*

*17 "Yet your people say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' But it is their way that is not just. 18 If a righteous person turns from their righteousness and does evil, they will die for it. 19 And if a wicked person turns away from their wickedness and does what is just and right, they will live by doing so. (Ezekiel 33:14-19)*

*9 For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. 10 He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.(1 Thessalonians 5:9-10)*

Because Karla repented of her sins and accepted Christ as her savior, she could face death unafraid. She knew that only her body would die—and that she, the one God created as her spirit, would go to heaven and live forever with God. Karla paid her debt to society. However, Jesus paid her debt of sin and she did not have to go to hell. This shows the love of God for sinners. No matter how depraved we might become, the blood of Jesus can wash us as white as snow. Karla wanted others to know this truth.

## **Law Versus Grace**

One cannot simply say that CP is immoral on Biblical grounds as God gave us both law and grace. The truth is society does fail and crumble if we fail to keep the law and also if we fail to

uphold it. The law tells us what we can and cannot do. It tells us how far we can or cannot go, and God tells us to obey the law of the land. Humanity is a free moral agent and is capable of choosing good or bad behavior. Humanity must also be responsible to accept the consequences of that behavior. (Naturally the punishment for crime should fit the crime.) One may be influenced by their environment, but they are not ultimately controlled by it, as we have many testimonies of people who have risen above their poverty and evil surroundings. It makes sense to reward evil with punishment just as we reward those that have done good deeds. If we are not responsible for our choices, neither blame nor praise makes any sense.

As Christians, the Lord writes His law upon our hearts and we no longer have to be slaves to sin. He gives us the Holy Spirit which enables us to not only keep the law, but to go beyond what the law requires in doing good. We are told not only to forgive our enemies, but to do good to them. This takes God's grace because we cannot love them without calling on the love of God. Jesus did not abolish the law. Scripture says He fulfilled it.

*<sup>17</sup> "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. (Matthew 5:17)*

## **God's Reign Will End CP**

If we desire to see fair trials and justice done and see CP end and yes, even the end of all forms of killing, violence, and death—we must realize that this can only come about through the kingdom of God coming to this world. God's kingdom can only come about as all persons yield to God and His laws. That time is coming when Jesus returns to this earth. At His second coming, He will then rule with a rod of iron and the devil will be chained and his followers destroyed. Satan can no longer tempt persons with evil, so there will be no more murder and evil in the earth. We shall enter the Millennial Reign of Christ, when the earth shall rest from its tribulations. However, until that time, God has instructed us, as His children, to allow and pray for His Kingdom to be manifested in our individual lives and communities. We can change the world through allowing Christ to rule in our lives and thus affect those around us with His love and grace.

For those who refuse to allow His reign in their lives God has set government authorities in the earth to restrain evil by enforcing the laws of the land. Granted, they are imperfect and some are even evil. However, the alternative would be that evil would overcome those that were good if there were no laws. We can change the bad laws by allowing God to use us in our spheres of influence. We must do our part to pray, witness, and become involved in the world to change it for the better. That is the way the kingdom of God will be established in our world through allowing God to reign in our everyday lives.

Although the New Testament does not contain new codes of law which govern the death penalty, God killed individuals because they engaged in various transgressions in the Old Testament). However, there was only one instance in the New Testament for lying about Church donations: This describes how a couple, Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of real estate. They gave part of the money to the apostles, claiming it was the full proceeds from the sale. Peter interpreted their act as lying to the Holy Ghost. God killed Ananias on the spot. Three hours later, Sapphira repeated the lie to Peter. He cursed her and God killed her immediately. Members of the church were understandably terrified.

*<sup>1</sup> Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. <sup>2</sup> With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.*

<sup>3</sup> Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? <sup>4</sup> Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

<sup>5</sup> When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. <sup>6</sup> Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

<sup>7</sup> About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup> Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

"Yes," she said, "that is the price."

<sup>9</sup> Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

<sup>10</sup> At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup> Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. (Acts 5:1-11)

## Capital crimes according to the Christian Scriptures

The Christian Scriptures (New Testament) do not contain codes of law which govern the death penalty. However there were many references to CP which indicate that the Hebrew Scripture's codes were still being applied during the 1st century:

**Mark 14:62**: Jesus was accused of blasphemy. The high priest asked Jesus Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?. Jesus replied I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven. Matthew 26:64 and Luke 22:70 contradict Mark's account; they record Jesus as sidestepping the question. However, Christ was still found guilty of blasphemy.

**John 8:3 - 8:11**: This famous passage describes an adulteress who was scheduled for stoning. Jesus told her executioners He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. These verses have often been quoted to indicate Jesus' opposition to the death penalty. However, this passage is apparently a Christian forgery; it is not present in the oldest manuscripts of the Gospel of John, but was added later by unknown person(s). Besides, Jesus does not challenge the right of the accusers to kill her according to the Mosaic law.

**Acts 6:8 - 7:60**: Stephen, a Christian, was found guilty of blasphemy and stoned to death.

**Romans 13:1-5**: Paul instructs Christians to submit themselves to the authority of the state, because "The authorities that exist have been established by God." Referring to the authorities, Paul writes in Verse 4: "*For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.*" The reference to "sword" might be interpreted literally (to refer to CP) or symbolically (to refer to the power of the state to punish wrongdoers).

## ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST CP

Christians, and our churches, are divided on the issue of whether CP is right or wrong.

Some proponents of CP see it as mandated by the Old Testament Law. However, Christians are no longer bound by the legal code of Old Testament Law. The argument of a Biblical mandate for CP is also contradicted by the fact that many of the capital crimes in the Old Testament are considered relatively minor today. Very few people in the Christian world would support CP for such things as doing work on the Sabbath, false prophecy or making false statements about a woman's virginity.

Many proponents of CP interpret the phrase, "authority does not bear the sword in vain!" in Romans 13:1-5 as New Testament authority for CP. However, the point of this passage is that Christians must not use their freedom from the Old Testament religious Law as an excuse to violate the civil law. We must obey civil authority, which is instituted by God, because of fear of punishment as well as conscience (verse 5).

Opponents of CP see it as revenge and human judgment that Jesus and His apostles so often warned against. They believe the principles set by Jesus and the apostles restrict punishment to only that which is necessary to protect society (i.e., humane confinement of offenders).

Opponents of CP also point out that Jesus taught great principles for us to apply in our lives, rather than specific laws. Thus, his failure to specifically condemn slavery, CP and many other evils should not be interpreted as approval of those things. They see the mercy He showed to the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-11) as His rejection of CP. However, Jesus never specifically repudiated CP.

Some opponents of CP see a prohibition against CP in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:13, "Thou shalt not kill" in the King James Version). The original Hebrew word *ratsach*, translated as "kill" or "murder" could refer to either killing in general or unlawful killing (murder). However, most experts think this is not a prohibition against CP because the death penalty is specifically authorized elsewhere in the Old Testament.

There is no clear Biblical mandate either for or against CP. Old Testament Law prescribed the death penalty for an extensive list of crimes, many of which are minor today. Based on New Testament teachings, the moral aspects of the Old Testament law still apply to Christians, but the ceremonial and legal aspects do not. The general principles taught by Jesus and His disciples oppose any kind of revenge, but there is no specific teaching against CP.

## CHURCH POSITIONS

The three largest Christian denominations in the United States are split on the issue of CP. The Roman Catholic Church opposes it in virtually all cases; the Southern Baptist Convention approves of it in certain cases; the United Methodist Church opposes it in all cases. Here are the official position statements:

### **Roman Catholic:**

2267. Assuming that the guilty party's identity and responsibility have been fully determined, the traditional teaching of the Church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor.

If, however, non-lethal means are sufficient to defend and protect people's safety from the aggressor, authority will limit itself to such means, as these are more in keeping with the concrete conditions of the common good and more in conformity with the dignity of the human person.

Today, as a consequence of the possibilities which the state has for effectively preventing crime, by rendering one who has committed an offense incapable of doing harm-without definitively taking away from him the possibility of redeeming himself-the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity "are very rare, if not practically non-existent."

From *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, second edition, copyright © 1997, United States Catholic Conference, Inc., <http://www.usccb.org/catechism/text/pt3sect2chpt2art5.htm>

### **Southern Baptist:**

A resolution adopted at the June, 2000 convention of The Southern Baptist Convention affirms the use of CP "by civil magistrates as a legitimate form of punishment for those guilty of murder or treasonous acts that result in death." The death penalty should be used only when there is "clear and overwhelming evidence of guilt," the proposal says. It also calls for "vigilance, justice and equity in the criminal justice system," with CP "applied as justly and as fairly as possible without undue delay, without reference to the race, class or status of the guilty."

From <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?Id=6002>

### **United Methodist:**

We hold governments responsible for the protection of the rights of the people to free and fair elections and to the freedoms of speech, religion, assembly, communications media, and petition for redress of grievances without fear of reprisal; to the right to privacy; and to the guarantee of the rights to adequate food, clothing, shelter, education, and health care. The form and the leaders of all governments should be determined by exercise of the right to vote guaranteed to all adult citizens. We also strongly reject domestic surveillance and intimidation of political opponents by governments in power and all other misuses of elective or appointive offices. The use of detention and imprisonment for the harassment and elimination of political opponents or other dissidents violates fundamental human rights. Furthermore, the mistreatment or torture of persons by governments for any purpose violates Christian teaching and must be condemned and/or opposed by Christians and churches wherever and whenever it occurs. For the same reason, we oppose CP and urge its elimination from all criminal codes.

From The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church--2000, ¶164A.  
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<http://www.umc.org/abouttheumc/policy/political/a-basicfreedoms.htm>

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