



## Capital punishment

The other day an article appeared in the local press about the stand of the United Church of Canada on the issue of capital punishment. While all of the local clergy interviewed were against a return to capital punishment, the *"churchmen say their congregations may support a return to the death penalty."* That's not the first time that clergy are not representative of the thinking of the people in their congregations. What struck me, however, were the *arguments* used by the clergy against reinstating capital punishment. I want to look at a few of them.

1. *"Murder doesn't entitle us to murder in return,"* says one minister. As if capital punishment, carried out by duly appointed executioners, is murder. The magistrate is armed with the sword to prevent murder, says the Catechism. If I kill someone by taking the law into my own hands, then I am guilty of murder. But when someone appointed by God to carry out punishment does it, it is *not* murder. Rulers are God's servants for good, says Romans 13, and do not bear the sword in vain. (And the sword referred to is that of the executioner.) One would think that ministers of the Word would understand that elementary distinction.

What is more, in the same body of legislation in which God forbids murder (the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment), he prescribes the death penalty for several offenses. Is God contradicting himself? Of course not. The 6th commandment forbids us to kill our neighbor out of hatred or revenge. But God himself decides which crimes call for the death penalty, and He entrusts that duty to the magistrate who acts in the name of God. That is not "murdering in return."

2. *"The 'eye-for-an-eye' philosophy in the Old Testament is superseded by the New Testament gospel."* Capital punishment is *"contrary to the spirit and teaching of Christ."* That is an old standby that has been used many a time. But it is dead wrong just the same. Old and New Testaments cannot be played over against each other in this fashion, neither in this case nor in that of the imprecatory psalms. You find the same principle at work in both testaments.

First of all, the *"eye-for-an-eye"* rule is not a cruel, vindictive law at all, but was introduced by God in order to prevent undue harshness in punishment. God was simply concerned to spell out that the punishment meted out was to fit the crime perpetrated. It was the principle of retributive justice, and that principle still holds in the New Testament too (Cf. Matthew 7:2; Luke 11:29-32; 12:47-8). Furthermore, the spirit and teaching of Jesus is consistent with that of the Old Testament, including His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, and it does not contradict or rule out punishment for sin (cf. e.g. Matthew 5:17-20; 7:13, 14, 21-23; John 2:13-16; Mark 11:15-17; Hebrews 10:26-31).

3. *"I'm still not convinced capital punishment is a deterrence to murder."* In the first place, that is not the point. If God says that he who sheds Man's blood must have his blood shed by man, then we don't counter by asking whether or not it is a deterrent. God's laws are good, whether or not we think they work. What is more, Romans 13:3, 4 clearly teaches that punishment is a deterrent to evil. And if capital punishment were carried out swiftly and effectively, it would be a great deterrent, as has been demonstrated more than once in history. Aside from that, however, God has established a "balance" in this world, so that he who willfully takes a man's life must himself undergo a penalty that restores the balance — restitution must be made. On that principle the whole house of justice stands.

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