

The Death Penalty

Written by K B Napier

Wednesday, 22 September 2010 09:24

Timothy McVeigh, The 'Oklahoma bomber', was put to death recently. Many agreed it was just. Others call for the abolition of the death penalty. Amongst these are Christians, who base their argument on the commandment 'Thou Shalt Not Kill'. Are they correct? In this short paper we will show they are completely wrong, misled by their emotions and not led by God's word.

Exodus 20:13

"Thou shalt not kill."

This verse, taken from the Ten Commandments, is very clear. It says you shall not kill. But read it without thought and you will be misled! The word 'kill' in this text is *ratsach*. It means to commit premeditated murder. It can refer also to accidental killing or to killing for revenge. The stronger meaning is to assassinate. Therefore, God's commandment is **"You shall not commit first-degree murder"**.

This, of course, alters the perception of what most folk *think* this text is saying! It does NOT tell us that killing of any kind is wrong. It simply tells us not to murder. The same word is used in Deuteronomy 5:17 in a repeat of the commandments.

The reader might retort that I am misusing an Old Testament text when, really, we ought to look at what Jesus told us. Well, if we do that and look at, say, Matthew 5:21, we might get a different answer:

"Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment:"

The word for 'kill' in this New Testament text is *phoneuo*. It means to slay or to murder! The fact that this word is only used of murder can be traced back to the root word from which

phoneuo

comes –

phoneus

, meaning a murderer, or, a homicide. This word can itself be traced back to its own root word,

phonos

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, which also means murder or slaughter. Then, to cap-off the absolute meaning of the word 'kill', all these words find their beginnings in the obsolete word

pheno

, meaning 'to murder'. The same word for 'murder' is also found in a partial repeat of the ten commandments found in Romans 13:9. It is not the same as judicial killing.

So, we can establish, without any difficulty at all, that folk who insist on referring to the Ten Commandments when rejecting the death penalty, have got their facts wrong. God says we must not murder. He does NOT say all killing is wrong. Throughout scripture there are many examples of times when God Himself orders the death of individuals, groups, armies and whole nations. We read of God's men, called by Him, hacking people to bits, where they stood! So, if we say that all killing is wrong and against God's will, we are actually charging **God** with unlawful killing.

In the Old Testament, we find David complaining to God, because the wicked oppress the poor and commit murder. He pleads that such men will be 'taken in the devices that they have imagined'. That is, they ought to be captured or arrested in the act. (e.g. Psalm 10).

The same word for 'kill' is found in, say, Jeremiah 7:9, but there it is directly translated as 'murder'. In the proceeding verses God says of people who do these things, ***"Therefore pray not thou for this people, neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession to me: for I will not hear thee... Do they provoke me to anger?... mine anger and my fury shall be poured out..."***

The rebellious soul might again retort, 'yes, but that also included all the sins of the people, not just murder'. Agreed, but murder is listed as an act qualifying for God's wrath and punishment. When Jesus replied to the young rich man, He specifically repeated one of the commandments and said, ***"Thou shalt do no murder."*** He thus precisely interpreted the word 'kill' for us.

Murderers are listed by Paul as receiving the wrath of God (Romans 1:29). In verse 32, we are told, again very specifically, that such are 'worthy of death'. He says those who allow these awful things to go unchallenged and unpunished are 'inexcusable' (2:1). Even worse, we see that those who do not judge murderers (to death) will themselves be judged by God: ***"(Do you think) that thou shalt escape the judgment of God?"***

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We find this is first given as a warning in ancient times: **“He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall surely be put to death”**.

(Exodus 21:12). The ‘death’ in this text means to execute as a judgment. We know that the ‘smiteth’ in this text refers to murder because the following texts all refer to murder. Note that the killing of a man is counted to be worthy of death, but the killing of an animal (belonging to another) is not (Leviticus 24:21), thus removing the claim made by animal rights’ campaigners, that killing animals is a form of murder.

In Numbers 35 we find examples of deliberate killing by a variety of implements, including the hand. In each case, the man who kills is called a murderer who **“shall surely be put to death”**. We find also that to put a murderer to death requires the eyewitness testimony of witnesses – something that is sometimes not done today. However, certain scientific advances have enabled us to use techniques effectively as ‘witnesses’, such as DNA tests, plus circumstantial evidences. However, scripture would not accept putting a killer to death if there was *only* circumstantial evidence. In such cases, the final judgment must rest with God. He will judge the murderer anyway, but He also ranges the law against them as an earthly punishment. When we put a murderer to death, we must not rejoice in it.

Hanging a murderer was evidently an early punishment (Deuteronomy 21:22). It takes moral courage and strength to put a man to death (Joshua 1:18), but it must be done. If a murderer is not put to death, then his guilt is put not just on those who know about it: it is placed on the whole nation! Thus, God’s judgment is put on us all if we do not insist on the death penalty. (e.g. Deuteronomy 19:10 & 13). Very clearly we must not pity the murderer.

What if a man becomes saved whilst awaiting his fate? It does not matter; the death penalty must still be carried out. What if we put to death the wrong man? This cannot occur if we follow what scripture says: there must be at least two witnesses. If such witnesses are not found but there is a great deal of other evidence to link the person with the killing, then perhaps we may imprison that person... but may not put him or her to death. It is quite ironic that the Muslims who are called ‘barbaric’ are closer to God’s demands than we are, in the matter of some legal punishments: **“Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot...”** (Exodus 21:24 etc).

No doubt many will reject all this and say Jesus does not insist on final punishment for killing. They are wrong: what do you think it means in the New Testament: **“... obey magistrates...”**? We are to obey those who have legal rule over us. If we do not, then we disobey those placed over us by God. That includes the death penalty they should (but do not) impose for murder.

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The New Testament does not rescind the death penalty imposed in the Old Testament for first degree murder. We are told to obey those who rule us in law, or to expect the consequences. We are also told that to let a murderer go free is to heap his guilt on our own heads. We can see from all the above that murderers are condemned by God, Who says we must not show pity for the killers. Rather, we must put them to death.

Sadly, too many Christians think emotionally about many matters. This is an error, for God's commands and laws are not open to debate or to the volatile nature of emotions. His commands are absolute and final and we must obey them, no matter what. It could be argued that it is a good thing that we no longer apply the death penalty for all those sins listed by Moses. But, who says it is a good thing? Humans do! Think about it!

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