



Conducted by
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“What should the Christians attitude be to capital punishment, and does the statement in Genesis 9:6 apply today?”

GENESIS 9:6 says “whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man.”

First of all let us notice the context of this very important stipulation of God. Because of its wickedness the world had been destroyed by the flood, and only eight souls had survived. The earth was now completely devoid of human or animal life except that which the ark contained. On releasing Noah and his family from the ark God makes a gracious covenant with mankind—the *Magna Carta* of God’s providence. Both the world and the church had been reduced to one small family. God blessed them (v.1) *ie.* promised to take care of them, and that the world, while it remains, would be theirs. They were to multiply and replenish the earth (a big task) Every

living thing would be meat for them (v.3) and they were sanctioned to eat flesh, but not blood. To facilitate this benefit God implanted a fear of man into all the animals, fowl and fish (if God were to remove this fear, man, of course, would be the hunted and not the hunter). Thus man received the power he has over the beasts of the field. Man was to look after himself and his fellow man — and also take care of the animals (v.10). The seal of the covenant and of God's good intentions was the rainbow in the sky. In this basic covenant, with its sweeping terms, God was the benefactor, and little was asked from man by way of reciprocation. This covenant, it is important to note, was applicable to Noah *and all his seed after him*. Thus this covenant applies to us today. God also laid the basis for absolute respect for human life when (in v.5,6) He said "And surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it, and at the hand of man; at the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man. Whoso sheddeth man's blood by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God made he man." Perhaps in the evil state of humanity prior to the flood life had been regarded cheaply and murder was rife. It certainly does not appear that murder was publicly avenged prior to the flood. In short, then, under the covenant with Noah God promises to bless man and gives him express authority to eat flesh, but forbids him to eat blood. God also expresses His abhorrence of murder and murderers, and instructs that wilful murderers must surely be put to death. Generations have come and gone since then, and indeed the economy of Israel has come and gone, but it is still true today that Man's duty is to replenish the earth, to be free to eat flesh, to abstain entirely from eating blood and under no circumstances to murder his fellow man. The fear of man is still present in animals, fowl and fish, and the rainbow still constitutes the sign that God will never again destroy the world by water. We are the seed or offspring of Noah and so that covenant applies with equal strength today.

The question before us is, of course, as to whether the instruction of God to Noah that murderers must surely be put to death applies today with equal strength. To my mind the answer obviously depends upon whether we can find in the word of God evidence that God has ever changed His mind on the matter. Did Christ or His apostles teach the abrogation of capital punishment? I must confess that I am unaware of any such evidence. Perhaps some kind brother may be able to correct me on this matter, and I will welcome any views on the subject.

The Jews certainly carried out the injunction given to Noah concerning murderers, and (to quote only one instance) we read in Deut. 19:11 the following: "But if any man hate his neighbour, and lie in wait for him, and rise up against him, and smite him mortally that he die, and fleeth into one of these cities: then the elders of his city shall send and fetch him thence, and deliver him unto the hand of the avenger of blood, that he may die. Thine eye shall not pity him, but thou shalt put away the guilt of the innocent blood from Israel, that it may go well with thee." Thus in the case of premeditated murder we have the commandment that the murderer must be arrested by the elders (not a mob lynching) and delivered to the magistrates (the avenger of blood) to be executed. No eye was to pity the murderer. It is said that, today, more tears are shed for the murderer than the murdered. The Jews, then, certainly carried out capital punishment for murder (and indeed for many crimes other than murder) and we will find no evidence of the death penalty having been abrogated.

Did Jesus, or His apostles, say anything which approached a direct, or even an indirect cancellation of the instruction given to Noah? I have as yet failed to notice it. I think Jesus recognised two worlds: the small few who would find eternal life, and the large world outside on the broad road to destruction. It is the desire of Jesus that all the world would become His disciples and members of His church; but until that time comes there must exist the church, small in number, in the midst

of a large uncaring world. The world at large is not subject to the laws of Christ, but the church must be subject (Rom. 13:1-9) to the laws of the properly constituted authorities. Within the church the problem of a death penalty does not arise. The church of Christ (unlike Israel) has no courts of law where penalties for crimes are dispensed. *The church* does not make laws or administer justice, for she is subject only to the law of Christ and love. The church however is, like every other citizen in the outside world, subject to the laws made by the respective nations throughout the world. Such magistrates are God's servants, bent upon good government and the keeping of law and order. If we can envisage, then, a Christian being guilty of murder he would not be subject to a penalty meted out by the church, but rather by a worldly judge. Jesus recognised this and certainly did not disapprove of it. Paul also said that we would *suffer* as evildoers if guilty of evil. First Peter 2:14,15 expressly states that we must submit to every ordinance of man, and that kings and governors are doing God's will when *they punish evildoers*. The apostle Peter agrees precisely with Paul. Paul is very strong in Rom. 13:4 (and is speaking to Christians, we remember) and says, "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, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil." We are to "*be afraid*". The magistrate does *not bear the sword* in vain. In a sense the mention of the sword could be taken figuratively, but the authorities (Roman) Paul was referring to certainly used the sword literally. The sword is not used by the "revenger" except in the case of capital punishment. To my mind Paul was regarding the ultimate in punishment as being the death sentence. Paul would not use *a sword*, being a disciple of Christ, but he recognised the right of national magistrates to use it in the punishment of crime. This seems a far cry from the apostles abrogating of the death penalty. In any case, it is not the function of Christians to fix punishments to suit crimes, or even to participate in the carrying out of them. Their function is to *obey* the rules and laws of the magistrates and society (the world at large). Recognising this Paul, when he stood trial before Festus, said, "If I be an offender, or have committed anything worthy of death, I refuse not to die..." (Acts 25:11). Paul clearly recognised that in the eyes of the ruling legal tribunals, there were crimes worthy of death. We are, according to Rom 13 and 1 Peter 2. to be subject to such laws and to such magistrates, for this is the will of God. On this basis then, I suggest that "the Christian's attitude to capital punishment" can only be an academic one, for the *magistrates and judges* of the nation's courts *make their own penal code*. Christians may have an opinion on that code, but are not responsible for it:—they have only a responsibility to obey it. We are in the world but not of the world (not in any smug self-righteous sense) and as such we must allow non-Christians to make laws as seem fit to them (they are God's ministers in this limited sense). If the magistrates employ a capital sentence for murderers it seems to me that they could justify it from Gen. 9:6, and indeed it may well be that they have a *duty*, according to Gen. 9:6, to employ the capital sentence.

From Gen. 9:6 we have the inference that official magistrates be appointed to secure the execution of murderers. God certainly was not going to kill all murderers supernaturally, although all such will ultimately face God; nor was it God's intention that the *next of kin* of the murdered should seek out the murderer and avenge the crime (for this would merely have made the avenger a murderer in turn). Officially appointed officers of law are obviously intended: and so with Noah we have the beginning of law being entrusted to society.

Some say there are no such things as *little sins* and *small sins*. But I reckon that God regards murder as the greatest of sins, and stipulated that murderers must die (at the hands of the official avenger of blood, Deut 19:11). Murder is the most daring and heinous act of rebellion against God; it assaults God's visible image on

earth and destroys the life which God gave. We must remember *why* murder was to be punishable by death — “for in the image of God made he man”. Surely this basic reason for capital punishment is not one that time can alter?

Objections to capital punishment usually are that it is barbaric; uncivilised; “unchristian”; irrevocable (disallowing repentance and conversion) and often unjust (through the rare event of miscarriage of justice). But surely all of those objections (except the unchristian one) must have been equally true in Noah’s day. Did God give Noah an instruction which was barbaric and uncivilised? We must take care that we do not accuse God in this way.

In brief then, I do not see evidence that Gen. 9:6 has been amended, or annulled. The Christians attitude to capital punishment can be but academic, since Christians do not make laws for the world at large to obey, but rather the reverse. Both Jews and Gentiles had death sentences for murder, and other lesser crimes, and the British ‘life sentence’ in prison was unheard of. It may well be that if judges today followed the Bible system of punishments for crime there would be less anarchy and violence in the world.