



Conducted by
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“Deuteronomy 19 prescribes ways of dealing with wrongdoers. Would such a system be valid and even essential today, or does the method of dealing with criminals and wrongdoers change with time?”

The twin problems of guilt and punishment have exercised the minds of men throughout the ages, Laws are made for the regulation of society. What the christian needs to understand is that he belongs to a christian society - in which the problems of guilt and punishment are inseparable from considerations of good and evil - and at the same time finds himself a part of a greater society in which the laws are not theocratic but criminal, and in which the initiators of those laws could find themselves guilty and punishable through contravention of the very laws which they themselves have initiated. To put it another way, the distinction between wrongdoing (unrighteousness) in the theocratic sense, and criminality in the secular and statutory sense, needs to be defined clearly if the christian is to understand the variations of offence and punishment in each case.

Regulatory or corrective?

Laws may be regulatory or corrective, or an admixture of both. Regulation is a method of control, a setting of standards, a system of moderating between good and evil. Correction is an attempt to ensure that standards which have been previously set are properly met. I believe

that all secular laws, both of so-called civilised and uncivilised communities, are modelled on theocratic laws. I hold that all theocratic laws – those initiated by the true and living God, and those attributed to some false and inanimate god through a priestly class – are in the main regulatory by nature with some correction inherent in them. Conversely, most secular laws I see as corrective by nature. Their development has been historic, and their main objective is to contain an already worsened situation. It is against this background that we must attempt to say something useful relevant to the question.

The Old Covenant Laws.

Deuteronomy chapter 19 must be read in conjunction with Exodus chapters 21-23; Numbers chapter 35; and Joshua chapter 20. Perhaps we ought to examine the situation as portrayed there.

The laws are given to regulate the behaviour of the children of Israel in the Promised Land. When the Lord God gave them the land they were to set up Cities of Refuge so that every slayer might flee to one of the cities. The innocent slayer was to find permanent refuge, but the one who killed with hate in his heart should be turned out of the city of Refuge and delivered to 'the avenger of blood' to be killed. The last verse in Deuteronomy 19 reads, "And thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot".

The foregoing provides a classic example of a theocratic law relating to killing for the situation in which it was given. The children of Israel were about to go over Jordan into Canaan to possess the land. It was a new start for them, and one can understand why God would want them to start in a way befitting of His children. God's main concern was that evil should be put away from among the people, and His aim seems to have been to dissuade people from committing sin. It was, if you will, a divine deterrent, but like so many other deterrents it was not wholly effective because the later history of the nation of Israel indicates that the people sinned over and over and over again and constantly incurred the displeasure of God. Nevertheless, we still find that people in the twentieth century vociferously proclaim the principle of 'a life for a life', even though, as the questioner suggests, the methods of dealing with criminals and wrongdoers have changed with time.

The New Covenant alternative

It was Jesus, in his so-called Sermon on the Mount, who presented the world with a startling alternative to the 'eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth' teaching, and added a revolutionary dimension to social behaviour. He taught that punitive measures, externally applied, would not produce the right result, and that only discipline engendered from within would produce the correct christian and social behaviour. God had prophesied through Jeremiah that He would make a new covenant with the houses of Israel and Judah. God's law "would be in their inward parts, and written in their hearts" (Read Jer. 31:31-34) The teaching of Jesus seems to be the culmination of this new inner perception between good and evil.

There is no doubt at all in my mind that some of our more enlightened laws stem from this New Covenant initiative, but it is sad to relate that people have shunned the gospel which can produce the changed inner condition that Jesus spoke about; but even more catastrophic has been the spectacle of those who have ostensibly undergone a changed inner condition seeking revenge for wrongs done to them, both imagined and real. However, the basic problem as Jesus sees it is still the same as that posed by God; the struggle between good and evil. A new dimension, though, is given to evil; if a man thinks it, he has done it. The law of intent is invoked but even this law was demonstrated by God when he gave instructions to Moses to set up Cities of Refuge.

The new covenant pattern, then, illustrates a difference in method of dealing with wrongdoers. Judgement will be in the future, both for the christian and the non-christian. Punishment or reward will be eternal. The pure, both in practice and intent, will go to heaven; the impure (sinners) will go to hell. I am not unmindful that God dealt summarily with Ananias and Sapphira, but this again was surely for a special reason. All peoples, christian and non-

christian, would also be subject to the laws of the lands in which they lived and would have to endure the punishment meted out by the civil authorities for contravention of those laws. It is worthwhile to note that a non-christian may never fall foul of the civil laws but still be guilty before God for neglecting those righteous laws which have been manifested in Christ.

The impact of social evolution on laws

It is evident, then, that methods of dealing with crime and wrongdoing have changed with time, both on the part of God and man. The law regarding murder is so enlightened at the moment that the introduction of Cities of Refuge in the modern age are really unnecessary. The State used to be 'the avenger of blood' in the sense that it would slay the convicted murderer, but now it no longer carries out that method of punishment. If any other person took it upon himself to be 'the avenger of blood' then he himself would fall foul of the same law which would eventually convict the one whom he slew. The law of 'a life for a life' is still seen by some as the ultimate deterrent, but what if innocent blood is shed in the process? This is the burden that society, through its legal and judicial system, has had to carry in the past, and the majority of people have come to the conclusion that the shedding of innocent blood through mistakes is too heavy a burden to bear.

What worries many people, including myself, is the way in which social evolution (or should we call it social revolution) is determining the laws the society should live under. You will recall that we mentioned regulatory and corrective laws at the strat. I am of the opinion that during the last two or three decades, parliament has not, by its laws, regulated the society in which we live, but rather responding to some sections of society who seem intent in diluting the standards, both moral and social, which would ensure a wholesome social structure. We only need to look around us to see that this is so. Sexually obscene photographs and periodicals are on public display; betting shops are around each corner; wife and husband swopping parties take place; divorce laws are so relaxed that marriage is becoming meaningless; violence is rampant; strikes occur at the drop of a hat; mental and visual excrement is allowed by the media. What people want, and not what they may need, seems to be dominating the making of our laws. Or is it that we are in danger of becoming a law unto ourselves? Anarchy may be just around the corner.

Many people are now crying, "What can we do?" Some say, 'give treatment to a psychologically sick society'; others say, 'bring back hanging and the birch'. Many have opted out completely, "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die". The danger with correction is that it can come too late and too ineffectively. I am convinced that what society needs is clear and courageous leadership from the top; perhaps we shall then begin to see some improvement.

Yes, dear questioner, methods have changed and will continue to do so. But I am glad that I belong to a christian society whose leader has given me clear and precise instructions as to how I ought to live. I am glad to follow Him whose laws are benign and benevolent, who loved me so much that He came down to earth so that He might demonstrate His values to me. I'm glad that I don't have to find my own way. Aren't you? In the meantime, I shall have to abide by those secular laws which are for my good, and oppose those that contravene the theocratic laws that have become my guide and mentor.