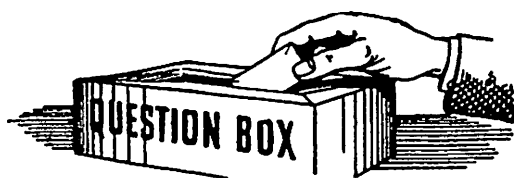


Our question was, "Does the Bible contradict itself?" To the honest heart, and to the mind filled with Bible knowledge, the answer is "NO."

R. Graham.



Conducted by
Alf Marsden

"In view of the recent happenings in America, what should the Christian's attitude be to capital punishment. Is there scriptural teaching to guide us?"

The 'recent happenings in America', as you may have guessed from the question, concerned a young Englishman resident in America, and coming under the law of the State concerned. He had committed a particularly violent crime, i.e., he had evidently killed two people in a cold-blooded murder. He had been incarcerated in prison in the part notoriously named 'Death Row' which, I understand, is in close proximity to the final place of execution. As very often happens in such cases, his lawyers had kept going to court with technical points relative to the conviction; each appearance resulted in a 'stay of execution'. The sort of appeal had been going on for some twelve years and seemingly had the backing of a condemned man. What was being sought on his behalf was life imprisonment instead of execution.

There is no national policy in the States regarding capital punishment; each State legislates on its own behalf. Even the way in which the execution is carried out varies from State to State. Any State, of course, can decide whether or not to have capital punishment for capital offences. The above is just a 'thumb-nail' sketch of the system; names and place-names have been excluded because I do not see them as germane to the thrust of the question.

Punishment.

Punishment itself is well attested to in the Bible. In the Old Covenant it was given as God's Law, and we can read the specific details in the Books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy; these Laws deal in the main with offences against person and property. Sometimes God punished the whole nation for their infidelity and contravention of His Laws. None were exempt, no matter what their station in life; even Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land with the children of Israel; kings also felt the full force of God's wrath because of disobedience.

A crime, then, is an act punishable by law. Many people have taken the Gilbert and Sullivan 'Mikado' view of this; 'to let the punishment fit the crime'. Perhaps we have tried to bring up our children in this way in the discernment of 'right' and 'wrong', but 'rightness' and 'wrongness' can have as many variations as there are people. We can set the standards in our own families, but in general terms the law of the land has to set the standard as best it can to deal with most offences, and inflict such punishment as it appropriate. That is far from perfect, but it is the best system we have.

The Old Covenant View.

As I have already pointed out, God gave specific instructions to the nation of Israel after He had brought them out of the bondage of Egypt. Concerning murder He said, "He that smiteth a man so that he die, shall be surely put to death". Ex.21:12. He also mentioned pre-meditated murder, "If a man come presumptuously upon his neighbour, to slay him

with guile; thou shalt take him from mine altar, that he may die". 24:14. There was also a law against kidnapping, "He that stealeth a man, and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death". 21:16. So here we see summary judgements concerning murder, pre-meditated murder, and kidnapping; if found guilty of these crimes, the criminals were put to death.

There was also a law concerning manslaughter, "If a man lie not in wait, but God deliver him into his hand; then I will appoint thee a place whither he shall flee". 21:13. These were the so-called Cities of Refuge (see Num.35:9-14). There were three East of the Jordan, and three West of the Jordan. No part of Palestine was far from a City of Refuge. These cities were an attempt to stop 'blood feuds' in the land of Canaan so that the land would not be desecrated. It had been laid down in Gen.9:6, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God made He man". In practice this meant that if a man murdered another, then the nearest relative of the murdered man was expected to avenge his death; he then became known as 'Avenger of Blood'. This was done irrespective of whether the first death was deliberate or accidental. You can see how this system would develop into a 'blood feud', because the avenging would just go on and on. If in the first instance the death was accidental, then the killer could flee to a City of Refuge and there receive a fair trial. If at the trial it was decided that the killing was in fact deliberate, then the killer would suffer the death penalty (I have tried to give a brief explanation of one of God's most complex laws. Hope you understand it).

The above follows the principle laid down in Lev.24:19,20., "If a man cause a blemish in his neighbour; as he hath done, so shall it be done to him; breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth".

The New Covenant View.

In his sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill..." Matt.5:21. He then goes on "But I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgement". To some, this may seem that Jesus is saying something different from what the O.T. scriptures say, but you will notice from His discourse with the rich young ruler that he exhorts him to keep the Commandments. The young man says, "Which"? Jesus answered, "Thou shalt do no murder,... etc.". Paul also taught, "he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill... etc." Rom.13:8,9. Peter in 1 Pet.4:15; and John in 1 John 3:15, also reiterate the same teaching.

New Covenant teaching takes individual responsibility to the extreme. Jesus said, "Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart". Matt.5:28. In 1 John 3:15, John makes the same point regarding 'hate' and murder. The teaching of Jesus and His Apostles is designed not to 'destroy' the law but to 'fulfill' it, therefore, the Commandments are given even greater force by their teaching. So we can see that killing is not only an offence against God's law, but it is also an offence against the dignity of man, God's creation.

The View of Society.

Crime, and its punishment, is still a very complex issue, perhaps more complex than at any other time in history. Some want the death penalty for all capital offences; others want it on a more selective basis, e.g., the killing of policemen; abolitionists want life imprisonment instead of the death penalty; some want life imprisonment to mean life, others want remission on life sentences, and so it goes on. As regards the recent case in America, we must not forget that the convicted man had agreed to the way his lawyers had conducted his case; I think what caused the most revulsion was what happened in the final hours before his death; even a murderer is allowed some dignity, even though he may not show it himself.

The scene is further complicated by acts of violence, terrorism, the ever-increasing disregard for the sanctity of human life. Many people are concluding that not only is law and order failing them, but that God also is failing them; and that, if course, makes the Gospel more difficult for people to accept.

The Christian, I believe, must remain aloof from all this clamour. He must follow the dictates of God, and God has said that while we are here in this arena of life that we must be "subject to the powers that be... for rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil". Read Rom.13. Therefore we can at no time take the law into our own hands. If it is decided by Parliament that capital punishment should be restored for capital offences, so be it, no matter what our personal views may be about the issue. Furthermore, we Christians must never lose sight of God Himself. Paul's word from God is, "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath... Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good". Rom.12:17-21. Our loving God protects us from evil by saying, "Vengeance is Mine; I will repay, saith the Lord". No matter what evil we may have to endure here, ultimately that promise of God will be fulfilled. In a different sense, our 'City of Refuge' is God. With Him, justice will be done.

(All questions, please, to Alf Marsden,
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