

In 1991, eleven-year-old Junny Rios-Martinez was kidnapped, raped and murdered. His killer, Mark Dean Schwab, was sentenced to death a year later. For sixteen years, Junny's family waited for "closure," and as the date for Schwab's execution approached, fifteen family members gathered to watch the ending of the killer's life. When Schwab's execution was delayed once again (November 15, 2007), the family was angry and frustrated.

There is a marked contrast between this family's reaction and that of the Amish community in Quarryville, Pennsylvania, in the aftermath of the October 2006 school shootings. Instead of seeking vengeance, that community relied on their love for each other, and their belief in Jesus' admonition to forgive. The Amish community, I believe, has already experienced healing and "closure" as they have supported one another through their grief.

As the Supreme Court continues to wrestle with the question of whether or not the death penalty is "cruel and unusual" punishment, the questions that Christians must consider are equally challenging. Are we willing to accept the possible execution of innocents, and the ongoing racial/social bias in sentencing persons convicted of capital crimes? Do we believe that God has the power to redeem even those who have committed unspeakable acts of violence? And finally, do we believe the Biblical claim that vengeance belongs to God? I believe that Christians must prayerfully consider all of these questions before supporting the government's right to take human life.

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Endnotes

¹ <http://www.wesleylowe.com/cp.html#deter>, accessed 10-16-2007.

² <http://www.mindspring.com/~phporter/econ.html>, accessed 10-16-2007

Hermann Weinlick

I thank our authors for their passionate words about the effect of the death penalty on those who are executed and also on the others involved — their families, doctors, prison employees — all of whom suffer from their contact with capital punishment. I would like to add a few comments on other aspects of this issue that seem important to me.

First, the death penalty has to do with what sort of God we as Christians worship. What does our God look like? How does our God relate to creatures like us? The Bible as a whole gives us contradictory pictures of God. God is pictured as destroying Sodom and Gomorrah and all of humanity except the family of Noah. That sort of God seems like the kind of God who approves of capital punishment, indeed metes it out. But the Old Testament God is also pictured as marking Cain to preserve him from revenge for killing his brother, as giving second chances to such guilty characters as David and

Jacob, and as having enormous patience with the descendants of Abraham. This does not feel like a God eager to use the death penalty.

The Gospels, however, in their picture of the one we Christians believe is God in the flesh, reveal a God who is consistently nonviolent, does not use murder as a tool, and suffers the death penalty. At his arrest he tells a defender, “All who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52). While there are no specific prohibitions of capital punishment in the New Testament, we have the words in the Sermon on the Mount, “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44), and we know that, for the most part, Christians in the first three centuries after Christ, before the time of Constantine, did not feel military service was consistent with Christian profession.

The New Testament shows me a God who does not bless the death penalty. (I have heard many times — in sermons or in biblical commentaries — about the illegality of Jesus’ trial or trials before Jewish and Roman authorities. But I cannot recall anyone in the treatment of the passion narrative raising the question of the justice of the death penalty.)

Second, the death penalty has to do with what kind of people we are. Since we reflect the God we worship and are the body of Christ, as Paul tells us frequently, it seems to me that we cannot bless the death penalty. I heard a Christian say once, “I oppose the death penalty because I could not in good conscience pull the switch or press the button or do the injection

myself.” Simply, the death penalty makes us less like the kind of people God wants us to be, and less like the kind of people who reflect the character of God, at least the God revealed by Jesus. That statement could be made about many human activities: from war to playing violent video games to prostitution, some of which the state considers illegal and some of which the state considers legal. But, if we are US citizens, the death penalty is an activity that is done for us, by those who as government employees work for us.

Some of those activities that make us less like what God wants, like war and divorce, are defended as last resorts, when other ways of dealing with differences prove ineffective. But it is hard to defend the death penalty as a last resort, when we have alternatives like prison, unless the conditions of our prisons are such that death is a more merciful penalty.

Third, one of the unspoken assumptions behind the death penalty is that there are good people (us) and bad people (them), and the death penalty is reserved for bad people (them). This seems to me to question one of the central truths of Christian faith, that we all fall short of God’s intent for us and that we all may be redeemed. One of the things that Jesus’ ministry seems to imply consistently is that the people his followers thought were different — women, lepers, those who were demon-possessed, Samaritans, tax collectors and prostitutes — were like his followers. Or more directly, in the Gospels, Jesus’ followers included all kinds of people.

Certainly some criminals are sociopaths who need to be separated from society, perhaps permanently. But some are people more like you and me whose lives have been complicated by mental illness, the misuse of alcohol or other drugs, or skin color. This does not mean that their acts should have no consequences, but it does mean that they are not as different from us as we like to think.

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Sarah Atwood

Elizabeth McOwat asks what is wrong with Americans that they still have the death penalty? Quite honestly, I cannot say what is wrong with us. I'm a sophomore in high school. My civics class has just finished reading the novel *The Chamber* by John Grisham. We have discussed all the pros and cons of the death penalty. Still, as an American I am not proud of the death penalty, and as a Christian, I am confused by it. I agree with a bumper sticker that says "When Jesus said 'Love your enemies,' I'm pretty sure he didn't mean kill them."

What purpose does the death penalty serve? It does rid us of dangerous criminals because they can't kill if they are dead. However, jails also rid us of dangerous criminals. They can't kill if they are locked up.

We claim to kill only when we are sure beyond a shadow of a doubt that this person is guilty. However, we are only human and therefore make mistakes. In North Carolina, a man named Darryl Hunt was falsely convicted of murder and spent 19 years in prison for it. Twenty years after conviction, we discovered the true murderer. What if we had killed Darryl Hunt? We can't give back a life after it has been taken. Even one mistake in one thousand is too many. Yes, we get rid of 999 murderers. But if one person dies innocently, the State becomes the murderer.

I believe the only real purpose the death penalty serves is for one of the most primal human instincts — revenge. Say a man steals, rapes and kills your daughter; you would want him dead, wouldn't you? Humans naturally want revenge. We say it solves the problem, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. I disagree. I say it creates more problems than it solves. One family is hurt if a man steals, rapes and kills their daughter. But another family is hurt as much when the State kills their son. He may be a bloodthirsty psychopath, but he is still their son. In *The Chamber*, Sam Cayhall is on death row for blowing up an office and killing two Jewish boys. His daughter, Lee, is embarrassed by him. But when Sam is put in the electric chair, Lee cries for her lost dad. In some ways she hated him, but she still cries for him, she is still hurt, she is still angry with the State for killing her father. Does revenge ever work the way we think it should? Do we ever feel better afterwards? Coupled with the instinct of revenge comes the emotion of guilt.