

Death Penalty: An Opinion
BRIEC September 2017

The Biblical Research Institute (BRI) of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists has been asked for an opinion on capital punishment and its promotion within local Adventist churches. It was decided to take the request to the Biblical Research Institute Ethics Committee (BRIEC), discuss it there, and send it for review to BRI. Here is the result of our current deliberations:

1. The Bible does not ignore the insurmountable suffering and loss of those touched by horrendous crimes. Neither does the Church. It suffers with those who suffer and seeks to help them in whatever way possible, as long as this is consistent with Scripture. However, such suffering may raise the question of whether capital punishment would be an appropriate response to serious forms of crime.
2. The subject of capital punishment has been discussed from various philosophical, sociological, practical, and biblical-theological perspectives. It is, for instance, no question that the implementation of capital punishment is often fraught with procedural difficulties: that at times circumstantial evidence is used to convict a defendant, who may not be guilty; that minorities and the lower strata of society are disproportionately represented on death row; and that the result of its implementation—that is, the taking of human life—is irreversible. This should make us very cautious. But apart from these and other valid reasons, we are most interested in the biblical view of capital punishment.
3. The issue of capital punishment must be studied from the perspective of individual biblical texts and passages found in Scripture in various contexts. It must also be studied and understood from the perspective of a robust biblical anthropology, which is broader than exegesis and also deals with biblical principles. Over the years the Seventh-day Adventist Church has issued official statements—for instance, against violence, war, and euthanasia and in favor of tolerance and noncombatancy. The Church shares the biblical teaching of the immense value of all life and the sanctity of human life especially, which was created in the image of God. The Church seeks to preserve and protect human life. This is reflected in its strong emphasis on stewardship—God being the owner of all life and Christ being our Savior—comprehensive health care and instruction, as well as humanitarian aid. Adventists promote and encourage humanity’s fullest development—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually—through education and the proclamation of the message of the gospel of Christ, who came “so that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10, ESV). The discussion of the subject of capital punishment must be placed in such a context.

4. Adventists believe that violence and capital punishment have no place within the Church. In other words, it is not the task of the Church to take human life. While in the Old Testament under the theocracy the death penalty is mentioned in a variety of cases—for example, in connection with killing a human being (Exod 21:12), striking or cursing a parent (Exod 21:15, 17), kidnapping and selling a person (Exod 21:16), Sabbath profanation (Exod 31:14–15, Num 15:32–35), child sacrifice (Lev 20:2), adultery (Lev 20:10), incest (Lev 20:11), homosexuality (Lev 20:13), sodomy (Lev 20:15–16), spiritualism (Lev 20:27), blasphemy (Lev 24:16), idolatry (Deut 13:1–5), and premarital sex (Deut 22:23–24)—in the New Testament this legislation is not applied to the Christian church, which is spread among the nations. With His first advent, Jesus brought to an end the Jewish theocracy and established His kingdom ethics, as proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7) and in other places (e.g., Matt 26:52). The case of the man involved in incest in 1 Corinthians 5 shows that capital punishment is no longer practiced by the people of God. Instead, the church has the responsibility to approach blatant sinners with the goal of winning them back to Christ-like behavior and the acceptance of biblical teachings. If this fails, following Jesus’ mandate in Matthew 18:15–20, unrepentant sinners are to be disfellowshipped from the community of believers. However, even after their separation from the church, the local congregation should reach out to win them back. Therefore, killing heretics, as practiced by some Christian churches in the past, is not only unwarranted but absolutely wrong and unlawful from a biblical perspective. Nonetheless, this phenomenon will reappear when at the end of time evil powers will shed again the blood of the saints. God Himself will judge these powers (Rev 16:6; 19:2).

5. What about governments and capital punishment? We recognize that two biblical texts in particular have been used to support the death penalty as it is being executed by governments: Genesis 9:5–6 and Romans 13:4. The first text (“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed.” ESV) is spoken to Noah after the flood and precedes the Israelite theocracy. Therefore, it is not limited to the theocracy. But is this text a command, a prophecy, or a proverb that describes what normally happens if one purposefully or unintentionally ends human life? If it is a command, who is to do the killing of a murderer according to text or context? How should the larger setting of Scripture be understood where even in the Old Testament exceptions to the execution of the death penalty occurred (e.g., Moses and David) and where we find cities of refuge for those who had accidentally killed another person? The second text is a statement by Paul as he addresses the relationship of Christians to governments and talks about the sword that these authorities carry. The context deals with paying taxes and being submissive to governments. It may imply obedience as long as governments do not force Christians to disobey God (see Acts 5:29). There is no question about the legitimate role of governments in the civil use of the law, but is the mention of the sword enough to imply capital punishment? Does the carrying of weapons by modern police forces automatically imply and legitimize the death penalty?

The two texts must be carefully studied, taking into consideration, for instance, their literary contexts and settings, the thrust of the argument in the passage, and the Hebrew and Greek vocabulary and grammar. Currently, there is no agreement on the interpretation of these texts in the larger Christian community or in the Adventist Church. Consequently, there is also no agreement on the issue of whether, from a biblical perspective, governments are allowed or even required to institute capital punishment. But in view of the fact that capital punishment has no place in the Christian church, it is not right for the church to be seen as a quasi agent in advocating capital punishment, even though the state might carry it out.

We recommend supporting the practice of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in valuing human life as described above. Therefore, we would recommend that church members do not get involved in any campaign promoting death penalty. The mission of the Church is not to promote death but to announce life and hope.

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