

Capital Punishment
Oakwood Christian Church Position Paper
July 2009



Oakwood Christian Church does not take an official church position on the issue of capital punishment. We believe Christians are allowed to disagree on this issue and we do not require members or leaders to hold to a specific position regarding capital punishment. Using the Bible as our guide, it has been the primary teaching of our leadership that the government has the God-given right to execute justice, even to the point of capital punishment. Below is an explanation of the reasons for this conviction, as well as some biblical admonitions to governing officials regarding this and other issues of morality and justice.

Every human life is precious, having been made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Long before God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, God instructed all human beings not to shed innocent blood and indicated that those who did so forfeited their right to life. In Genesis 9:6 God said, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man." The enactment of capital punishment elevated the value of human life and satisfied the need for justice. Many generations later, in the New Testament, the authority of the government was verified when Paul wrote that the government is established by God. Though the government of which he spoke was the pagan Roman government, he validated their right to bear and use the sword. He wrote,

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer (Rom. 13:1-4).

Capital punishment, then, is morally justifiable only when a God-ordained government implements it in order to execute justice. If either of those factors is not present, if it is a vigilante authority or the punishment is not deserved, then capital punishment is unjustifiable.

Someone may ask about Jesus' commands not to judge others and to turn the other cheek. Jesus was not referring to the execution of justice by a God-ordained government. If he was, then the principle of forgiveness would apply not just to capital punishment but to all matters of criminal justice. We would need to throw open all the prison doors and close down the criminal courts. The passages in which Christ exhorts everyone to practice forgiveness refer to the attitude of individual Christians toward other individuals.

We believe that the entire New Testament contains the words of Christ, inspired by his Holy Spirit. So Christ, through the apostle Paul, gave government the right to bare the sword, showing that there is a difference between the duty of individual Christians to forgive offenses and the duty of government officials to execute justice.

Some may ask, “But what about the criminal’s soul?” Capital punishment need not lessen a criminal’s opportunity to hear the Gospel. In fact, those who are facing capital punishment are often more receptive to the Gospel than those who remain in jail under a life sentence. Thus, Christians should respond to this issue by providing intense ministry and evangelism to criminals on death row. God desires all men to repent and be saved, and Christ’s forgiveness is extended to those facing capital punishment. Our efforts to allow an individual to live a few more days on earth are fruitless compared to the value of sharing the hope of eternal life with him or her.

Our governing authorities would be wise to remember the Bible’s exhortations regarding the enactment of justice. Two biblical principles are especially applicable in the issue of capital punishment. First, the Bible encourages swift justice: “When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong” (Eccl. 8:11). Allowing an individual to wait for years on death row is unfair to all: the tormented criminal awaiting his sentence, the victim who hungers for justice, and the potential victims of murderers not deterred. The Bible demands that judges thoroughly investigate each case and commands them not to convict on circumstantial evidence; but assuming a fair trial has been given, the punishment should be enacted swiftly so that human life is elevated and the hearts of the people fear justice instead of murder.

Secondly, the Bible commands governments not to show favoritism (Lev. 19:15). A government that punishes one wrongdoer but allows another to be set free because of his financial means or racial advantage is not acting justly. Government officials who abuse their God-given authority in such a way will some day give account before a just and holy God for their actions. The answer to such injustice is not to set all criminals free, but to begin immediately to enact justice on all wrongdoers without showing favoritism.