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## Debating the Death Penalty

*...what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy... --Micah 6:8 NIV*

Convicted killer James Elledge was executed by lethal injection at Walla Walla State Penitentiary earlier this week, for the 1998 murder of Eloise Fitzner, an acquaintance whom he stabbed and strangled in the basement of the Lynnwood church where he worked. Governor Gary Locke had reviewed the case but declined to grant clemency to Elledge which had been sought by a coalition of death penalty opponents, including the American Civil Liberties Union and the Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle.

The death penalty is an issue that discomfits many in the faith community. At a recent news conference, Archbishop Alexander Brunett called for a more compassionate sentence of life without parole for Elledge, who at the time of the murder, was on parole for another killing in 1974 of a Seattle motel manager. But even though a majority of people disagree with the Archbishop in this case, too few can articulate why.

Clearly, many Christians are conflicted by the fact that while Mosaic Law calls for the death penalty in the case of murder, it also speaks to seventeen other capital crimes that for the most part, no longer arouse the ire or passion of the Church, much less the public at large. Judeo-Christian apologists are often challenged to explain how they can favor execution for murder without also supporting the same for adultery, sodomy, and cursing one's parents, which also carry penalties of death according to Scripture.

In his book, Creating A Nation Under God, Dr. David King, a physician specializing in internal medicine, presents a compelling argument for imposing the death penalty for murder, while extending mercy for most of the other capital crimes listed in the Bible. King says that God's purpose in establishing the various death penalties was to prosecute those on a path to eternal destruction and "provide them with the opportunity in court to recognize that they had sinned against God, so they could confess, repent, and be forgiven . . . in order that they might live, and not have to be executed." <sup>1</sup> For it is written:

*Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? Declares the Sovereign Lord. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live? . . . For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!*  
(Ezek. 18:23,32)

Dr. King points out that the caveat, "Show him no pity" (NIV), is attached to only two crimes, idolatry and murder. He contends that the expression—"Show him no pity" [mercy]—is conspicuously absent for all other crimes involving the death penalty, with the possible exception of "bearing false witness." King concludes that it is God's desire for judges to show mercy if at all possible for crimes associated with the death penalty other than idolatry and murder.

Man's philosophy for deterring crime, says Dr. King, ". . . reserves the threat of execution only for hard-core criminals, and completely hides the threat of execution from all the other lesser criminals." King continues:

"But God's philosophy for deterring violent crime and sexual immorality evidently involves bringing the death penalty 'right up front' as the standard punishment for most serious crimes (except stealing). In this way, the judges are required to show mercy if at all possible, unless Scripture absolutely forbids showing mercy (as in the case of idolatry and premeditated murder, where death was the mandatory punishment). In all other cases however, death was the maximum punishment, but not the mandatory punishment."

"Thus, God's courtroom philosophy of 'up front' death penalties not only provides a much greater deterrent to violent crime, sexual immorality, and drunkenness, but also transforms courtroom tradition from one of punishment to one of mercy in the face of a death penalty. In other words, after the sinner is convicted, instead of the judge trying to decide how much punishment to give, he now has to decide how much mercy to give."<sup>2</sup>

For nearly fifteen years, I have been vigorously involved in Jail Ministry and have visited several thousand inmates in jails, prisons, and youth facilities in my area. It has been my great joy to introduce some of them to the Lord during that time and to see marvelous healing and restoration occur. But I have also observed that new-born babes in Christ tend to prosper or wither in proportion to the length of their incarceration. And no wonder. They room with rapists, robbers, drug dealers and every foul and wicked spirit named among men.

Most pastors can confirm that much time is consumed between Sundays, counseling and holding the hands of parishioners who fret over their children, jobs, and car payments. But for a person with a life sentence, such everyday problems would be a god-send. Instead, life becomes a sad parody of the Bill Murray movie *Ground Hog Day*. Every day is a repeat of the day before. Even worse, tomorrow and every tomorrow for the rest of one's life on earth is predictable!

As the anxiety of the trial turns to despair following sentencing, few if any, come to counsel, disciple, or hold the hand of a struggling inmate, except for other inmates—the rapists, robbers and drug dealers. The war against the mind [fiery darts] is unimaginable and though the spirit is willing, the eventual, if not inevitable quenching of hope, puts the flesh back in charge with a vengeance.

Unless the next fifteen years teach me otherwise, I could not send a person to a place like that for life, thinking it was an act of mercy or compassion.

Nor would I wish to be purposefully disobedient to the Word of our Lord, who said, *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law . . . I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.* (Mt. 5:17, 18)

*Rick Forcier*

Executive Director

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<sup>1</sup> King, David James, MD., Creating A Nation Under God, 2000, Prescott Press, Inc., Lafayette, LA, pg.82

<sup>2</sup> Id., pg.83