

THE DEATH PENALTY? A Conversation Prompter

The federally encouraged Democracy Project, & similar efforts to motivate the citizenry to converse on matters of consequence to the health of our political way of life, are important also to our nation's--and the world's--religious life. At Fellowship Time (after Sunday Worship), our church--as part of our program of "Conversations of Consequence"--invites people to sit in a circle to talk about the day's topic (indicated by a signboard). The Jan.11 signboard will read "THE DEATH PENALTY?" This Thinksheet is a prompter to that conversation.

INSTRUCTION: Like abortion, the death penalty is an issue on which all but absolutists will grant that there are solid values, & therefore arguments, on both sides. To decide what is right is painfully difficult, & decisions should be tentative, open to continued listening to the other side. But decide we must: perpetual indecision is a luxury unavailable to the responsible citizen, the faithful Christian.

Faithful Christian & Yale law professor Stephen Carter, in his *INTEGRITY* (Basic Books/96), thus defines his title-virtue (7): "(1) **discerning** what is right and what is wrong; (2) **acting** on what you have discerned, even at personal cost; and (3) **saying openly** that you are acting on your understanding of right and wrong. The first criterion captures the idea of integrity as requiring a degree of moral reflectiveness. The second brings in the ideal of an integral person as stead-fast, which includes the sense of keeping commitments. The third reminds us that a person of integrity is unashamed of doing the right thing." (Underlinings mine.)

Our church's "Conversations of Consequence" are opportunities to engage in this first stage of integrity, namely, "moral reflectiveness."

Below you will find a grabbag of statements anent the death penalty. I've set them in no particular order & have tried not to "spin" them to my position (which, of course, is the "right" one).

Please: **CIRCLE** the numerals of the three statements you find most persuasive.
SQUARE the numerals of the three that most outrage you.

- 1 Increased use of the death penalty would help reduce the excess population--"excess" both in terms of the workforce needed & in terms of ecological burden (unduly stressing the biosphere).
- 2 Capital punishment is murder, & government has no right to murder--& is hypocritical when it does to someone what the person did to someone else, in the name of "justice."
- 3 It is specious to complain that the death penalty disproportionately affects the poor & "minorities." That is true of all forms of punishment, & it's unfair to single out the death penalty from the others for special opprobrium.
- 4 "Thou shalt not kill," the Bible says.
- 5 The wrongful execution of one innocent is sufficient argument against capital punishment.
- 6 Far more people are murdered by recidivists than are wrongfully executed. It's softheaded, & unjust, to protect the accused more than the public.
- 7 "An eye for an eye" is an uncivilized, pre-Christian mentality.
- 8 Serious crime is barbarous, & a government that kills criminals stoops to the barbarous level. That is why crimes are more barbarous wherever the state kills.
- 9 Jesus said "Turn the other cheek."
- 10 "Vengeance is mine, says the LORD." Under no circumstance does the public have the right to take revenge, humanly understandable though the urge is. Jesus says "Take the sword, perish by the sword": violence is a circle breakable only by forgiveness.
- 11 Life is sacred, which means inviolable. That is why "the right to life" is the first right listed in the Declaration of Independence.
- 12 "A killer with low serotonin is more likely to strike again after serving time

in jail" (81 NW 12.31.97).

13 Instead of death or life-without-parole, the condemned should be given the choice (at any time during incarceration) of death, life-without-parole, or torture-with-parole. (Specify the kind[s] of active torture. Is life-without-parole passive torture? What about public shaming, some modern equivalent of the pillory?)

14 Which is more "sacred," life or choice? Does it depend on what window I'm looking out of & what "window" I click on? On where I locate "dignity"?

15 Death being the most serious punishment, is no crime serious enough to deserve it? Is nobody "not fit to live"?

16 Is death the most "violent" punishment?

17 Is capital punishment "playing God"? God gives government death-power.

18 In this multicultural world, no society should have the freedom to specify what behaviors are death-deserving.

19 Should capital punishment be limited to repeat offenders?

20 The death penalty does not deter crime.

21 The death penalty eliminates crime: the executed never again commit crime.

22 The death penalty eliminates the possibility of repentance, faith, forgiveness.

23 The primary purpose of the death penalty is not to deter crime but to restore order by exacting "the final price" from the offender.

24 In the Bible, the death penalty is not limited to murder. If we don't execute for (say) usury or homosex. behavior, can we use the Bible to support capital punishment?

25 In Indonesia, the death penalty has been 100% effective in eliminating the pushing of "recreational" drugs. Is the drug problem in our country serious enough to call for this remedy?

26 Doesn't 2 Peter 3.9 (God "does not want any to perish") rule out state-sanctioned murder?

27 Do we need to kill people to show that killing people is wrong?

28 Since abortion is the lawful killing of a human being, can one reasonably be for it but against the death penalty, another lawful killing of a human being?

29 Since death in self-defense is legal, why not also death in society-defense?

30 For the government, throwing away the key is cheaper than death.

31 "To know all is to forgive all," as the French say. If we really understood the criminal, we would see that execution is itself a crime against humanity.

32 Is "penalty" being properly used in the phrase "the death penalty"? Is "punishment" being properly used in the phrase "capital punishment"?

33 Recently a judge sentenced a criminal to solitary confinement for life without parole. Is that less, or more, "vengeful" than the death penalty?

34 The will of the people? The American public is divided on abortion but overwhelmingly in favor of the death penalty.

35 Garbage pollutes, & the death penalty is garbage removal. Communal purity.

36 Death ends all chance of further discovery.

37 Tim. McVeigh wouldn't suffer enough if he were executed instead of imprisoned for life without parole.

38 Death is an alternative to incarceration. Too much prison-building.

39 Death is "cruel and unusual punishment."

40 Historically, opposition to the death penalty correlates with rejection of God.