

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

March 1991

We understand and sympathize with the rising public anger and frustration over crimes of violence both to persons and property. We are also deeply concerned for the victims of crime and hope to see effective measures developed to redress their sufferings and losses. The Vermont Ecumenical Council and Bible Society is, however, strongly opposed to death as a penalty for crimes regardless of the method of execution.

We affirm the responsibility of the State of Vermont for maintaining civil order and rendering justice. The state has the right to take the life of a person in self-defense; however, in Vermont, at the present time, it is impossible to argue convincingly that convicted criminals need to be executed as a means of providing for the safety of the public.

Arguments have been put forward and proposals drafted favoring death as a penalty on the basis:

1. that death as a penalty is necessary for the protection of society and the maintenance of civil order
2. that death as a penalty is just because it provides fitting retribution and punishment for a crime against life; and finally
3. that death as a penalty will serve as a deterrent to others who may be moved to murder.

To answer these arguments, we submit that:

1. The protection of society and civil order can be adequately provided for by other means. We do not need to have the state execute those convicted of murder to enhance or guarantee the safety of our citizens.
2. Retribution and punishment are neither sufficient nor necessary reasons for the taking of human life by the state. In spite of a common assumption to the contrary, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" does not give justification for imposing the penalty of death. Jesus explicitly repudiated the lex talionis (Matthew 5: 38-39) and the Talmud denies its literal meaning and holds that it refers to financial indemnities. When a woman was brought before Jesus having committed a crime for which the death penalty was commonly imposed, our Lord so persisted in questioning the moral authority of those who were ready to conduct the execution, that they finally dismissed the charges (John 8: 11). It may be that the state legitimately should seek retribution for the crime committed, but we submit that imprisonment up to life is sufficient. Further, capital punishment would show that we have given up hope for a solution which does not violate the values we hold most dear - that of reverence for life. Punishment from a Christian perspective is for the purpose of the reform of the offender and reconciliation of society and the criminal. Needless to say, execution does not enhance the possibility of either reform or reconciliation.

3. The evidence is inconclusive that the penalty of death serves as a deterrent to further crimes of murder. The United States Supreme Court in *Gregg vs. Georgia* 428 U.S. 153, in permitting use of the death penalty, conceded the lack of evidence that the death penalty reduced violent crimes.

Further, we would argue that:

1. God alone is the author and taker of life, not the State of Vermont.
2. Such an irrevocable act may, in fact, be mistaken and an innocent person may suffer loss of life.
3. Until death comes, we believe there is the possibility of repentance, rehabilitation and reconciliation; hence, every person should be granted maximum time for this to take place. When the state executes a person, their time is shortened and the possibility of repentance and rehabilitation is denied.
4. When the state employs death as a means of retribution, the civil order is thereby promoting the increased acceptance of revenge as an appropriate means of achieving justice and securing order. Such behavior is contrary to the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Christian Church.
5. When death as a penalty has been used, we have seen that the poor and disadvantaged members of our society have had a disproportionately high number of their people executed. This does not further the end of social justice.

For these reasons, we stand strongly opposed to death as penalty for any crime in the State of Vermont.

This statement has been developed with reference to the statements on capital punishment by member denominations of the Vermont Ecumenical Council and Bible Society.