

Why I Support the Death Penalty: Confession of a Reluctant Convert

by Wayne Northey

Like Timothy, from a child I was raised on Scripture. Jesus has been central to my existence for as long as I can remember. Attempting to "put on" the Lord Jesus Christ, to "clothe myself with" him, has been a way of life from my earliest beginnings.

And that's why I now support the death penalty. Because Jesus did.

Yet, this has not always been the case for me. I have opposed it in the past. For that, I repent profoundly. I guess it's just something that had to grow on me: a reluctant *metanoia*. And I know of lots of Christians who are still opposed. I now simply don't get it! In my view, there is nothing more patently clear than Jesus' call for that kind of death. Why can't some Christians get it? Don't they read their Bibles?

Sure. There is the range of standard arguments against it: God is love; we must love our neighbour *as* ourselves, which means a healthy self-love; Jesus is not to be taken literally; the texts are not authentically Jesus', etc. But they're simply not convincing. The evidence is too overwhelming!

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die." There it is, bald and unequivocal: the death penalty without sentimentality. No "*Never, Lord!*", lest Jesus say to us too, "*Get behind me, Satan* (Matt. 16:22ff)". This was with direct reference to the imminent death penalty hanging over Jesus - a capital punishment Jesus fully embraced. It is not of course surprising that Peter flatly denied such a prospect! Most Christians oppose the death penalty because of similar implications. But Peter knew he could not rise above his Master - as Jesus said (Matt. 10:24). And frankly, that's the whole rub about the death penalty! Following Jesus ineluctably means suffering and death. And that's why most Christians tend towards opposing it. What is the prototypical missionary call, with reference to Paul:? "*I will show him how much he must suffer for my name* (Acts 9:16)." And what did Jesus say?: "*I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life* (John 12:24-25)." Now that's the heart of Jesus' support of the death penalty right there! No "health and wealth" Gospel here! (Where *do* Christians get such notions?)

This is dangerously close to the essence of the Gospel, and why the death penalty is so opposed by some Christians - and most others for that matter! For death to self is no easy sell. It makes for lousy evangelistic strategy. In fact, culturally, it's a universal non-starter. For all cultures, ancient and modern, are premised upon death of others: what one anthropologist, René Girard, argues is a universal "scapegoat mechanism". The absolute uniqueness of the Gospel, its total revolutionary force, is the grand inversion of all such scapegoating ways in human culture. Not death of *others*, but death of *self* so that no others need ever again die - that is the breathtaking radical message of the Gospel (I John 2:2; Heb. 9:26 - 28, 10:1 - 10)!

That's why I believe in the death penalty. I just wish most Christians did - that everyone would! I guess that would mean heaven on earth!