

Dear Pastor _____,

Once again, you have asked a good, challenging question about the death-penalty! To answer that, we should first start with the foundational question of the Church's relation to government. The question of the Church's relationship to the state has been a challenge for the Church since the beginning with many different approaches seen in history and even in our day today. We've seen that some churches decide to unite with world governments (Catholic Church, Church of England, etc), claiming that every Christian has "dual citizenship" – you are to obey the government in the same way you are to obey God, because He has established the government as an authority in your life. Other churches claim world authorities have no authority over the Church – that Believers have absolutely no responsibility to the government as we are citizens only of Heaven and are only to obey God and no one else. Both of these views have partial truth in them, but they are both incorrect Biblically.

FOUNDATIONAL TEACHING ABOUT CHRISTIANS AND GOVERNMENT

Firstly, Scripture never teaches that we have "dual citizenship" in the world and in Heaven. The Believer's citizenship is only in Heaven, not the world:

"So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household" (Ephesians 2:19).

"For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20).

And Jesus clearly taught: *"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth"* (Matthew 6:24). **So, churches that try to unite with governments are in error.**

Yet, both Paul and Peter taught that the Church is called to obey the governing authorities:

"Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. 3 For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; 4 for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. 5 Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. 7 Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor" (Romans 13:1-7).

"Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, 14 or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. 15 For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. 16 Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God. 17 Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king" (1 Peter 2:13-17).

So, the Churches which teach that we have no responsibility to governments are clearly wrong.

How do we reconcile these two Biblical teachings – that we must obey God, not men, yet we are supposed to submit to the governing authorities? Well, we see in practice that Paul and Peter only obeyed the government when it did not conflict with the Kingdom of God:

*“When they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. The high priest questioned them, 28 saying, “We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.” 29 But Peter and the apostles answered, “**We must obey God rather than men.** 30 The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. 31 He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. 32 And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has **given to those who obey Him**” (Acts 5:27-32).*

So, we see the principle that if the government is commanding good things, we must obey them and work with great effort to be at peace with them, but if they command us to break God’s Law or His Word – such as commanding us not to preach the Gospel or hand innocent people over to be killed (think of the Jews in Nazi Germany), then we cannot obey them in these situations, but we do so respectfully and not with violence.

THE SOLUTION TO UNDERSTANDING IT ALL IS OUR REALITY AS AMBASSADORS OF CHRIST

Clearly there is much corruption and wickedness in all the governments of the world. How are we to respect their rule, while at the same time keeping our allegiance in Jesus only?

Paul gives us the key to understanding our relationship to the government as Believers:

*“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. 18 Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, 19 namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. **Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God**” (2 Corinthians 5:17-20).*

Every Believer is an Ambassador for our King Jesus. Ambassadors do not serve in the country of their citizenship – they serve in foreign lands, where they serve the interests of their government or king. Every ambassador’s mission in the nation where they serve is to reconcile them to their homeland. They say, “make peace with my King! Do not risk war! Do not suffer from His wrath!”

No Ambassador serves in the country of his citizenship, but in a foreign land. For example, an American Ambassador sent to Russia leaves America and goes to live in Russia with his family. They live in a home in Russia, they speak Russian, shop in Russian stores, follow Russian customs and traditions, pay using Russian money, and they drive their cars on Russian streets. While they serve in Russia, they are supposed to abide by the laws of Russia – they are to respect

the police and the government. For example, Ambassadors are expected to obey speed limits, not steal, not murder, etc. Does this mean their allegiance is to Russia? No. Their allegiance is to America, but their mission is a mission of peace and so they are expected to not cause trouble in the country where they are stationed. So, if Russia passed a new law that it is a crime to park your car in the street when it is snowing, an ambassador should obey that law and not break it. But if the Russia demands that an American ambassador disobey his president or disavow his homeland, he must refuse because he would be committing treason against his president and his people. An ambassador cannot obey the government where he is stationed when it requires him to betray his homeland and his king. In the same way, we are Ambassadors for King Jesus, and our citizenship is clearly in Heaven, yet we serve King Jesus in our postings here in the world. Our mission is to preach reconciliation to God – “Make peace with God while you can! Do not risk His wrath, but receive His salvation while you can! Do not continue in your rebellion!” We are to obey the laws and demands of the land we are serving under unless those laws or demands require us to betray our allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Throughout history there have been times and places where there were such laws and Believers could not obey them – this often resulted in persecution.

THE DEATH PENALTY

So, your specific question was about the death penalty. God’s Word has clear instructions regarding the death penalty:

“Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man” (Genesis 9:6).

God’s Word clearly teaches that the death penalty is acceptable for those who commit murder – the Old Testament Law actually laid the death penalty on many offenses beyond murder – take adultery for example. However, Christian teaching is often seen as less severe. For example, we see Jesus’ response to the woman caught in adultery:

“The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center of the court, 4 they said to Him, ‘Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. 5 Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?’... But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, ‘He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.’ 8 Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. 9 When they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center of the court. 10 Straightening up, Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?’ 11 She said, ‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said, ‘I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more’” (John 8:3-11).

Now, in this case, Jesus convicted the hearts of the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, for they were surely guilty of the same offense (in fact, it is commonly believed that one of the accusing Pharisees had committed adultery with the accused woman, just so they could take her to Jesus and test Him), and Jesus knowing all their hearts, knew the woman’s situation as well. Does Jesus forgiving the woman mean that judges should not hand out the death penalty in judgment for murder? No. Because we see that when Jesus returns to rule the earth, He will execute judgment upon the wicked and many, many people will die for their sins that they have

committed. Sometimes we forget that God Who is merciful and full of compassion is also a just and righteous God who cannot abide unrighteous ways. We see this in prophecies about Christ's rule on earth after the Great Tribulation (see Revelation 19):

“For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze,” says the Lord of hosts, ‘so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall. You will tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing,’ says the Lord of hosts” (Malachi 4:1-3).

“The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice; Let the many islands be glad. Clouds and thick darkness surround Him; Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne. Fire goes before Him And burns up His adversaries round about. His lightnings lit up the world; The earth saw and trembled. The mountains melted like wax at the presence of the Lord, At the presence of the Lord of the whole earth. The heavens declare His righteousness, And all the peoples have seen His glory” (Psalm 97:1-6).

“‘You who are far away, hear what I have done; And you who are near, acknowledge My might.’ Sinners in Zion are terrified; Trembling has seized the godless. ‘Who among us can live with the consuming fire? Who among us can live with continual burning?’” (Isaiah 33:13-14)

So, we feel that it is Biblical to say that a murderer deserves the death penalty according to God's Word. Even a murderer who has repented of committing murder is still expected to face the consequences of his actions, yet if he has repented to God and is saved, he will live for all eternity in the resurrection – this is the important thing. We are currently living in the age of Grace and the point of the Gospel is not to hand out judgment against sinners and death penalties, but to seek to reconcile people to God so that they do not face His wrath for all eternity. So, our first and foremost desire is to reach people's hearts with Salvation, regardless of whether they are in jail for crimes or being executed for crimes.

But a Christian serving as a judge in government should have no reservations about executing the death penalty as a judgment against murderers. He should not rejoice in their deaths and he should seek their salvation, but even if they come to know Jesus, they must still face the consequences of their actions. God knows that if societies forgive murderers the consequences of their actions, it robs the victim's families of justice and further breaks society down, emboldening the wicked and encouraging them to do wicked and evil deeds under the protection of the law. Similarly, imprisoning murderers for a time and releasing them back into society also emboldens the wicked and breaks down society – we are seeing that here in America where murderers and rapists are returned to the streets only to commit more murders – this breaks down our society's trust in our institutions to protect the innocent.

Additionally, there are usually two problems people have with the death penalty.

1. They think it is too cruel.
2. Innocent people are sometimes wrongly convicted and end up being executed.

First, people who think the death penalty is too cruel should consider that spending time in prison for most of your life is actually the very definition of cruel. Prisons are terrible places where terrible things happen to the inmates, and having a large population of dangerous people stuffed away in prisons is a horrible injustice to the inmates and to society. And returning murderers to society without paying the Biblical consequences of their actions robs the victim's families of justice and further breaks society down. The death penalty, if used correctly, is obeying Scripture and turning the murderer over to God's justice, which is perfect for all time.

Second, it is true that innocent people are wrongly convicted in this world, because the world does not have true justice. But we need to remember to keep our focus on eternity. We will never have true justice here in the world until Jesus returns to rule and reign on earth for 1,000 years – and God will judge the living and the dead on the last day. So, we need to understand that only God deals in true justice and He will provide true punishment to evildoers, just as He will restore all the wrongly accused and right all wrongs that are experienced in this life.

Brother _____, thank you for sharing your heart on this issue. Please let us know if we didn't really answer your question the way you hopes or if you have any further questions.

Love in the Lord, Brother,

Berean Lamp Ministries