

Editorial

A 15-year-old eyeing a quick quid selling small bags of dope might think it would be reasonably safe to approach a 30-something bloke in jeans, T-shirt and sporting a couple of day's growth. That feeling of safety would be enhanced knowing that the said potential customer was on crutches and had his left leg encased in a hip-to-ankle brace.

But for one unfortunate lad any such feelings of safety were sadly misplaced... Sen. Const. Smith is on sick leave, but had a surprising recall to duty last Thursday when he went to a deli to buy an iced coffee and some smokes.

The constable was approached by a young man who asked him whether he smoked pot. Ever alert, Sen. Const. Smith replied: "Why have you got some?"

The young man flashed two deal bags of what looked like marijuana and revealed the going price for \$25 for one or \$50 for two, prompting Smith to flash his identification to reveal he was a police officer.

Instead of jeopardising his reconstructed knee by executing a solo arrest, Smith retreated to his car,

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rang for back up and followed the young fellow as he rode off on a small girl's bike. "You would have laughed if you saw those legs going on the little girl's bike," he said.

After a slow "pursuit" over about a kilometre, the decamping cyclist abandoned his pink conveyance and jumped the back fence of a house... Uniformed back up arrived and the boy was placed under arrest, charged with trespass, offering to sell or supply cannabis, possession of the drug as well as stealing and damage over a couple other matters Cannington detectives had outstanding.

I read this article (edited) from The West Australian, Inside Cover of Monday July 28, 2008 and laughed; I could see the 15-year-old eagerly walking up to the injured guy buying cigarettes hopeful of selling his wares and then his sheer look of horror as he discovered the guy was a cop. I imagined his legs hastily pushing the pedals of the little girl's pink 'conveyance' in his attempt to evade the authorities. Then I thought how sad it is that a 15 year old was dealing drugs and I did some research.

These days we hear about drug problems all around us but what surprised me was the fact that among drug use statistics the most basic, yet important fact is - **alcohol is a drug** – in fact its the most commonly used and widely abused psychoactive drug in the world.

One survey showed that alcohol is the most commonly used drug among young people, alcohol kills 6 ½ times more youth than all other illicit drugs combined and youth who drink alcohol are 50 times more likely to use cocaine than young people who never drink alcohol.

Alcohol is by far the drug of choice among adolescents. It is the most used and abused mood-altering substance among pre-teens and teenaged children. Although some teens report it is easier to get illegal drugs than buy alcohol, the overall social acceptability of alcohol and the pervasive advertising that suggests alcohol creates a positive and rewarding experience often leads both teens and their parents to think drinking is simply a rite of passage with little danger over the long run.

Some studies in the United States suggest that there could be as many as four million alcoholics under the age of 18 which is three years below

their legal drinking age. The age when children begin drinking alcohol has decreased over the last few decades. Many children are already experimenting with alcohol in the fifth grade, many more than were just 10 years ago when teens were more likely to start drinking in eighth or ninth grade. According to the Centre for Disease Control, 40% of ninth-graders report that they tried alcohol before the age of 13 and had used alcohol within the past month.

In this respect, the example of parents is very important. Youngsters pick up on the living reality of their parents. A life-style that contradicts their teaching makes the parents lose credibility with their children. When parents warn and admonish their children with respect to alcohol use, but at the same time make excessive use of alcohol at their parties at home, the children will not be impressed by their testimony.

We should not fool ourselves into thinking that these things do not happen among Christians. It is a general problem closely related to our modern society and its affluence. It is a result of luxury, wealth and a lack of moral values; as the saying goes "*what pours in the world leaks in the church*".

A great number of people are addicted to cigarettes and are unable to quit smoking, even though the health hazard is undeniable. In many families and at many more parties, too much alcohol is used. Things are done, said and tolerated which in 'normal' circumstances are improper and unacceptable.

We are allowed to enjoy life and use all the gifts the Lord has bestowed upon us but we should never let these things rule over us. We must show self-control and restraint in everything we do.

From a Christian point of view it should be obvious to us that we do not need an 'escape' from reality into the world of drugs. True faith in Christ and a study of God's Word will give us the comfort and way to eternal freedom, an everlasting joy and future, which far outweighs the deceptive world of drugs.

"See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise [making the most of every opportunity], because the days are evil. Therefore, be wise and understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine but be

filled with the Spirit... giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."(Eph 5: 15-20)

Rita VanderWal

In this article I have freely quoted from:
Like Living Stones by Rev W Pouwelse 1985
www.gdcada.org/statistics/alcohol/htm and
www.gdcada.org/statistics/teens/htm
<http://www.adolescent-substance-abuse.com/myths-alcohol.html>

HELLO & WELCOME

... to yet another edition of the Contender

In this particular edition (whilst it was not planned) we have focused some attention on civil punishment and what a Christian's response to this is. We see and hear of many evils committed against people, and it easily can make us embittered when we see unjust men go unpunished or lightly punished and so called good people suffer at the hands of the unjust.

As such this is not a new phenomenon; in fact it has been around for centuries. The author of Psalm 73 also could identify with this situation. He became envious of wicked men, for their strength seemed firm, and they did not seem troubled as other men. They were proud and violent, they scoffed and spoke wickedly and they seemed to have everything their heart desired. There seemed to be no justice what so ever!

Yet when the author came into the sanctuary of God he came to realise that their final lot was not a good one. The Lord set them in slippery places, and cast them to destruction. They are brought to desolation and are consumed with terror. Yes the Lord will take vengeance on those that do wrong.

But in the mean time it is not joyous to see sin and immorality abound. It is also not easy to decide the best course of action for the perpetrator of (serious) crimes, also taking into account their victims and society as a whole. In this way the judges of our times certainly require our prayers.

In this edition Rita has introduced criminality in the editorial. Her editorial is followed by an article from Brendan on the arguments for and against the death penalty, as well as an article from Gerald who receives opportunity to share the gospel with prisoners. With the Olympics about to get into full swing as I write this, Ben shares with us the instructive evening the youth spent at a SPYSC meeting just recently, and he has also submitted an article about living a practical Christian life.

I think you'll enjoy reading these...

I have to say farewell to one of our editors. **Adrian Hordyk** has been an editor of Contender for a number of years now, and he would like to focus on some other things. Many thanks for all the work you have done in the past Adrian, also and especially for editing the articles for spelling and grammar. As a replacement for Adrian, **Joel Bosveld** has been found willing to take over his job. Welcome aboard Joel.

On behalf of the editors... Eric

A PRACTICAL LIFE

Think about discussions at club, and talks with your friends. We often find it very easy to discuss theological questions in great depth, but how often do we really talk about practical matters? The question of how to live life in a practical way is very important. We read in James 2:14 – 26 that a faith that doesn't show itself in a practical way is no kind of faith at all. "*For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead*" (vs 26). So how to be practical? Well there are many ways, and I hope to touch on a few of them. In so doing I would like to share some of my thoughts and some things I have read, importantly things which are grounded in biblical truth.

Where to start? I don't believe the place to start is with practical issues. Rather the place to start is knowledge. I remember someone asking in my youth club whether those present thought that our churches and our youth clubs were too focussed on doctrine and knowledge, and not focussed enough on practical issues. Personally I thought that perhaps we do not spend enough time on practical things, but on the other hand there is no such thing as too much doctrine. This is because without doctrine, we have nothing to apply. How can we apply the things we know to our lives if we don't actually know anything?

This is where the evangelical churches with their focus on feeling and living their faith get it so wrong, and why quite often people do not stay long in their churches.

These people are unable to really live their faith because their faith isn't deep and grounded in anything! Remember Jesus' parable of the seeds on rocky ground, without deep roots. They seem to be growing quite nicely, until the first sign of trouble. And then they are gone. Paul says in Romans 1:16-17, "*For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith'*".

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So it is important to make sure your knowledge is in order, and always growing. Read and study God's word regularly. Listen closely to Sunday's sermons. Make an effort to do prep study, come prepared and participate readily in Bible Study Club. Even those chapters that seem to contain only doctrine with little in the way of practical aspects will be helpful. Look through God's Word to discover so many passages that can be applied to our lives. With focus and dedication we can learn how to draw something from each chapter we study. Bible Study Club is about helping each other live in this 21st century world that is so against God. Everyone has some talent to bring to club for the benefit of everyone. Most important is personal prayer. We clearly understand that we cannot do any of this on our own, and God will grant his grace and spirit only to those who constantly ask and thank Him. Jesus promises in Matthew 6 and James 5 that we will receive whatever we ask in His name. So make sure you are praying.

With this lets have another look at James. James has had a tumultuous history for a Bible book. It confuses many people for it seems to say the exact opposite of Paul. Paul says, "*The just shall live by faith*". Martin Luther

rightly took this to mean that we can accomplish nothing towards our salvation. Klaas Kuipenga put it well when he told Henrik de Cock, "If I had to add only one breath to my salvation, I would be eternally lost". But then read James 2:14: "*What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?*"

What does this mean? Are we not just saved by faith anymore? Do we need works as well as faith to be saved? For this reason Luther called James

“a right strawy epistle” and put it in the appendix of his German Bible. But this cannot be right, for James like all other books is part of the Bible. What is James saying here? To look at it a different way, there are many who hold on only to an intellectual faith. They read the Bible, pray, attend church, and believe they have a strong faith. They think that if they believe the important biblical doctrines intellectually, then they are doing fine. But according to James, this is not enough. It ignores the ethical life, conduct, and the standard of living Jesus set before us as an example. James is saying that the kind of faith through which we are saved is a **living faith**, one that expresses itself in good works and righteous actions, and is not merely intellectual.

He gives us an example, one of many he could have given, of someone who is cold and hungry. The person with just an intellectual faith sends him away with the words, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled”, perhaps even piously wishing him God’s blessing. But what good does that do? Nothing! A true Christian is one who believes the important doctrines of the bible, and then puts them into practice by giving the hungry person food and clothing. That is reflecting the true love of Christ. James calls the intellectual type of faith, “faith without works”, but it is clear it is really no faith at all, especially as it’s the type of faith that demons also possess (3:19). So how does the gospel of faith with works fit in with Romans 1:17? Well it comes back to what true faith is. It is true that we are saved by faith and not through works, but a faith that is purely intellectual and does nothing, really isn’t faith at all. True faith is demonstrated **through** works, works that reflect the love of Jesus our Saviour.

Now it’s possible to read the above paragraph, nod our heads and say, “Yes I can understand that. It is certainly true. If one is to believe in Jesus Christ and follow him, there should certainly be an expression of compassion for other people in what he or she does.” It is possible that having acknowledged that intellectually, we still ignore the needs of others. However we need to recognise that if there is a person who is hungry and we have the means of alleviating that hunger, we are not really Christians unless we help that person.

Much of James is full of practical advice on how to live our lives. Chapter 3 talks about the tongue. We all know how much damage the tongue can do, and James even says that that the tongue is uncontrollable. This is very surprising. You would have thought an apostle of God would say something like, “the tongue is very hard to control, but God can help you control it.” James knew very well that we have spiritual help to control it. But carried away by the danger of the tongue he proclaims that no one anywhere has ever been able to control the tongue.

James proceeds to explain how with the same tongue we praise God and curse men, comparing this to a spring that produces both sweet and foul water. What does this mean? This is easiest to illustrate with an example. Our tongues are like that spring when we stand in church heartily singing praises to God and then step outside and gossip about others. This is totally against nature! James points out how it is an unbelievable anomaly for a Christian to speak words that are harmful and destructive to other human beings. It ought not to be. The explanation for this anomaly is not hard to find. It comes from the fact that we are sinners despite being saved. Our old nature so often does not do the things we want it to do, as Paul neatly articulates in Romans 6. Thankfully the solution is not hard to find either. Although with men tongue control is impossible, with God it is possible. You and I cannot control our tongues, but God with the power of the Holy Spirit inside us certainly can!

Chapter 4 of James talks about the wars and strife that is going on among the members of the church. Someone once remarked that for the human race “war is our chief legacy”. This is believable, for the 20th century saw more people die through violence than all previous centuries put together. James has an explanation for this. The tendency for violence stems from the desire for pleasure. We want what we are unable to have, and yet we still try to obtain it anyway, through murder, fighting and war. We do not have because we do not ask God. The solution according to this is simple: give up struggling and instead ask God what His desires for us are.

Problems with men are not the only problems we have. We also have problems with God. James

A Practical Life (continued)

calls us humans ‘adulterous people’ because we have committed spiritual adultery against God. Mankind has rejected God’s rightful rule and now fondly believes that we are masters of our own fate. This adultery becomes such a heinous crime when we consider God’s amazing love for us and what He has given. The solution James offers is to submit and draw near to God. How? Is the first move up to us to approach God? No, it is God who draws us to Himself. And this requires much humbleness. So long as we think we have a hand in contributing to what God is doing with our lives, we will be proud of what we have done. But when we understand how scripture portrays our fallen state, and how desperate we truly are, there is nothing to be proud of. It is all God’s work.

It is possible to keep discussing the practical aspects in James, but I want to move on. Romans 12 speaks a lot about spiritual gifts, and how we should use them. *‘For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches in teaching, he who exhorts and exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.’* This fits in well with James’ point about faith and works. Living a practical life is about using the specific gifts that God has given us for the benefit of others. The rest of Romans 12 and 13 give more tips: *“in honour giving preference to one another, distributing to the needs of the saints, bless those who persecute you, submit to the governing authorities...”*

So how does all this help us in our lives? I thought about discussing some examples of

*Fear God and keep His
commandments, for this is man’s all.
For God will bring every work into
judgement ... whether good or evil.*

practical things and what to do about them, but then had to admit that I just don’t know all the answers. So I’ll just mention a couple points. Perhaps you can consider and find out what God really says about them in his Word.

- The third commandment states very strongly how much God hates blasphemy of His name, and the catechism is equally strong about it, saying that not only those who blaspheme but also those who don’t work to prevent it as much as they can are equally guilty. What are we to do in today’s world where blasphemy and swearing is so prevalent and comes naturally to so many people? Do we ask everyone we meet, friends at uni, workmates, and customers to stop blaspheming? What do we do if this doesn’t stop them?
- With wall-to-wall labour governments around the country, things may become much harder for Christians to serve God without hindrance. Already in recent months we have seen the legalisation of the terrible abortion drug RU-486, the decriminalisation of small amounts of marijuana possession in WA, and the legalisation of prostitution in WA. What are the options open to us when the government is debating anti-Christian laws?
- Is it important for all Christians to be taking an active interest in politics and laws so that they can fight laws like these? What options are open to us when the evil laws are already passed?
- What are ways we can educate people about abortion, for example?

In conclusion, Ecclesiastes 11 and 12 give the reason for why we must live our whole life in the service of God. I can’t summarise it much better. *“Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes; but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgement. Therefore remove sorrow from your heart, and put away evil from your flesh, for childhood and youth are vanity.”*

“And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yes, he pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find acceptable words; and what was written was upright – words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd. And further, my son, be admonished by these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is wearisome to the flesh. Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all. For God will bring every work into judgement, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.”

So then life is about praising God. This is why we were created. Although sin has affected everything, we as redeemed people can still carry out this mandate of praising God in everything we do. James talks at the end of Chapter three of the contrast between heavenly and earthly wisdom. Worldly wisdom seems so attractive and wise, but

is not. God’s wisdom is the wisdom of Jesus Christ who came and gave Himself for us. Jesus gladly relinquished His rights in order that He might do good to others. He came not to be ministered unto, but to minister. Peter speaks about this in the second chapter of his first epistle, saying, “*Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps*”. He calls us to set Christ as our example, showing that because He humbled Himself, we should humble ourselves and serve others too. I do not know how anything can be more practical than this. Yet at the same time I do not know how anything can be more terrifying if we do not have the strength of God. If we look to ourselves, none of us have the strength to do what God requires. But if we look to God for His help, then He will accomplish changes in our lives, and our words as well as what we do will be a blessing to others.

Ben Schoof

“BY MAN SHALL HIS BLOOD BE SHED”?

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE DEATH PENALTY

A sixteen-year old bashed to death with a brick and stuffed into a wheelie bin by her friends.¹ Another sixteen-year-old strangled to death by her friends in Collie.² A man killed with a cricket bat while playing beach cricket with his kids, after he refused to let some men help themselves to the beer in his esky.³ A brutal rape, a horrific murder, a kidnapping that lasts for a decade. These are the sorts of crimes that just keep on happening in WA. And the government (fuelled by the media) has recently made some big noises on the issue.

As of the 1st of August the government has commenced new legislation which gives us all yet another good reason why not to get into a bar-

fight. I am speaking about the *Criminal Law Amendment (Homicide) Act 2008*. The lead up to this new legislation has been, as usual, over-hyped by the media playing mostly on the one-punch killings, but the reality is that there are some new and more important, much needed changes. Although it may seem like just another pre-election ploy so that our government can claim they’ve reformed criminal justice, these are quite worthwhile changes, and they will be discussed later.

More to the point, the extensive media coverage has awakened a fair amount of discussion and interest in the general population. Recently I was privileged to a lively youth club discussion on what the Bible tells us to do with our criminals. Most were initially adamant that capital punishment was a Scriptural command. But after a vocal dissent, some were not so sure. Yet we all agreed that if capital punishment is Scripturally-condoned, we should work to promote it, while if it is Scripturally condemned, we should work to abolish it. Right now, it seems we are sitting back on the issue.

¹ *The West Australian* 22 December 2006

<<http://www.thewest.com.au/default.aspx?MenuID=77&ContentID=16973>>

² *The West Australian* 9 May 2007

<<http://www.thewest.com.au/default.aspx?MenuID=77&ContentID=28263>>

³ *The Age* 27 December 2007

<<http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/father-of-five-killed-in-cricket-bat-attack/2007/12/26/1198345081525.html>>

“By Man Shall His Blood Be Shed”? (continued)

None of us would deny though, that in the face of the crimes we hear about, we all feel inclined to clench our fist and reminisce the firing squad days. Then we remember Romans 12:19 where God says that “vengeance is Mine, I will repay.” **Retribution is not a Scripturally justifiable reason for executing criminals.** Why does God say this? Because retributive justice assumes the one taking retribution is fit to do so, and we are all, rapists and killers included, equally dead in sin.

But even if we dispassionately examine the issue of capital punishment with God’s Word in mind, we may still come to the conclusion that capital punishment should be a sentencing option in our Criminal Code. Supporters of a Scriptural command to administer the death penalty for certain offences cite three main factors: the institution of the death penalty for murder in Genesis 9, the Mosaic laws as recounted above, and the lack of evidence in the New Testament suggesting that the Mosaic death penalty has been rescinded. Yet all of these factors can be deconstructed to a certain extent.

The Mosaic law, as given by God to the Israelites at Mt Sinai, prescribes the death penalty for eighteen different offences:

- Murders: Ex 31:12-14, 20; 22:2-3; Lev 20:2; 24:17, 21; Num 35:11-21, 30; Deut 19:11-13
- Accidental death of pregnant woman or her baby during a fight: Ex 21:22-25
- Kidnapping: Ex 21:26
- Adultery: Lev 20:10; Num 5:12-30; Deut 22:22-24
- Incest: Lev 20:11-12, 14
- Homosexuality: Lev 20:13
- Bestiality: Ex 22:19; Lev 20:15-16
- Striking a parent: Ex 21:15
- Cursing a parent: Ex 21:17; Lev 20:9
- Rebelling against parents: Deut 21:18-21
- Rape of a married woman (although not the rape of a virgin): Deut 22:25-29
- Killing of a person by a dangerous animal that had killed previously and yet was not kept caged: Ex 21:28-30
- Fornication: Lev 21:9; Deut 22:1

- Sorcery, witchcraft: Ex 22:18; Lev 20:27
- Cursing God: Lev 24:10-16
- Attempting to lead people to worship other gods: Deut 13:1-16; 18:20
- Avenging a death despite an acquittal from the law: Deut 17:12
- Testifying falsely in court when the accused is facing the death penalty: Deut 19:16

(Taken from Dave Llewellyn, “Restoring the Death Penalty: Proceed with Caution” *Christianity Today*, 23 May 1975, 11.)

Obviously this would be far beyond the scope of our own criminal justice system. Perth would be a ghost town if we applied the ninth bullet point. Yet the case for capital punishment is more entrenched than we might think. In fact, in Genesis 9:6, long before Mt Sinai, God stated the capital punishment principle quite clearly: **“Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed.”** This was included along with the creational mandate to be fruitful and multiply (9:1). If we ignore Genesis 9:6, we ignore our creational mandate. Therefore, it appears that capital punishment is firmly established in the Old Testament.

Yet those supporting the existence of an implicit Scriptural command to administer the death penalty ignore a few important points. The covenant with Noah in Genesis 9, of which the death penalty clause is a part, is ultimately still subject to the atoning work of Christ in the New Testament as will be dealt with later (see 1 Peter 3:18-22). So are the laws of the Pentateuch. So then it must come down to the reasons behind the establishment of the death penalty in the Old Testament, and whether these reasons still apply.

Firstly, it should obviously be noted that a death penalty would be a great deterrent, which, as we all have to agree, is the entire point of punishing criminals. This is acknowledged by Scripture in Deut. 17:12-13. Yet more importantly, God wanted His people to root out the evil and accursedness from amongst them. A good example is Israel’s defeat at Ai where Achan’s sin aroused the wrath of God against the entire nation. God says in Joshua 7:12: “Neither will I be

with you anymore, unless you destroy the accursed from among you.” Joshua had to single out Achan from the entire nation and have him stoned along with his sons and daughters and all his possessions, in order to avert God’s wrath from the people and ensure victory against the men of Ai.

However, the death penalty as a way to avert God’s wrath can no longer be said to apply. Australia is not God’s chosen nation. The Church is now God’s chosen people, and while it is true that we have to destroy the sinfulness from among us, this comes in the form of excommunication, not the death penalty.⁴ More specifically though, Christ’s death is the foremost sacrifice that has served to avert the Father’s wrath away from us. The whole point of a sacrifice in the Old Testament was to atone or purge away sin. Christ’s ultimate sacrifice does away with the need for a second method of atonement. The author of Hebrews declares that Christ: “offered one sacrifice for sins forever” (Hebrews 10:12).

In fact, Paul states that we as believers already *have* died, with Christ, in the atoning death: “that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves...” (2 Corinthians 6:2; cf Gal. 2:20). The atoning value of a sacrifice, or a death in order to avert God’s wrath, has now been superseded by the death of Christ. As written by a leading author on the death penalty debate: “it...mean[s] that Old Testament practice furnishes a dubious theoretical basis for insisting on capital justice in contemporary secular society....and [such arguments] must be rejected as inconsistent with New Testament teaching on atonement.”⁵

Thus we must move on to what the New Testament teaches. Overall, it appears rather vague on the issue, and perhaps purposefully. There are a number of implicit endorsements of the death penalty such as Jesus’ words in Matthew 26:52: “All who take the sword will perish by the sword.” Jesus also instructed his disciples to

purchase swords (Luke 22:36) and he includes the slaughter of enemies and traitors in the Parable of the Minas (Luke 19:27). He also quotes the wrongfulness of murder as from Ex 21:12 without indicating as to whether the death penalty was to be removed, thereby suggesting that nothing had changed (Matt. 5:17-20). Jesus also recognised Pilate’s God-given authority in John 19:11 which included the authority to put people to death by crucifixion, and also Paul’s words to Festus, where he said: “If I am in the wrong and have committed something for which I deserve to die, I am not trying to escape death” (Acts 25:11). His words presuppose that the government has the authority to administer the death penalty.

Yet none of this is conclusive. In Matthew 26 Christ was saying that those who live a life of violence can expect to die in violence. He was speaking about self-protection and that followers of Christ can expect a dangerous future in Luke 22, and in Luke 19 we must remember Jesus is telling a parable, not reality, and besides, the message of the parable had nothing to do with the death penalty. As for John 19 and Acts 25, both Jesus and Paul acknowledged the ability of the government to administer the death penalty, but neither of them show explicit signs of approval. Hence none of these can be said to concretely answer the question of death penalty or no death penalty.

Those opposing death penalty often cite John 8 where Jesus refuses to support the execution of an adulterous woman stating to her Pharisee accusers that “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her.” Yet advocates will quickly point out that Jesus wasn’t commenting so much on the method of punishment as He was pointing out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and their desire to test Him.

Finally, advocates in favour of the death penalty will find the most determinative passage in the New Testament in Romans 13:3-5:

*“Do you want to be unafraid of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same. For he is God’s minister to you for good. **But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear***

⁴ Cf 1 Cor. 5 and 1 Tim. 1:20

⁵ Christopher Marshall *Beyond Retribution* WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001, p.222.

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the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute⁶ wrath on him who practises evil.

“If you do evil, be afraid” encourages the idea of civil punishment as being a deterrent, as covered earlier in Deuteronomy 17. To enforce civil punishment, the authority (“God’s minister”) bears the sword. The plainest interpretation of the use of the word ‘sword’ suggests capital punishment. Indeed, that is probably how Paul’s first readers would have interpreted it, as the sword instantly conjures up the Roman practise of beheading criminals. John Calvin likewise interprets this passage as the ability of the government to administer the death penalty and says that “contend then do they with God who think it unlawful to shed the blood of wicked men.”⁷

And he is right. Those who try argue against the death penalty by saying that we live in the New Testament and the new covenant which is all about love and peace and goodwill and therefore we should oppose war and capital punishment, are misusing Scripture. Still, this does not settle the matter of the sword. Commentators are at odds with each other over whether the original word meant simply authority to mete out punishment, or specifically the authority to choose between life and death.⁸ It appears, then, that capital punishment can be inferred from this passage as a *right* but not necessarily a *command*.

And that is the only conclusion that we can safely reach regarding death penalty in the Bible. As Romans 13 and Genesis 9 clearly illustrate, capital punishment is not considered immoral, in fact it is considered a God-given right (though not a command). On the other hand, the institution of

the cities of refuge in Joshua 20 shows God is willing to show mercy. God spared the life of Cain thereby preventing a vicious trail of vengeance so early on in the history of the world. God also spared the life of David even after he orchestrated Uriah’s death in order to sleep with his wife Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11), two sins which under the Mosaic law are death penalty sentences. And he was a public figure, in full view of the eyes of all Israel. Imagine the response of the media if Australia’s prime minister committed such an offence?

Clearly God’s Word allows for mercy and compassion to our criminals, and if that is the tack by which our government wishes to approach criminal justice, then our place is to accept that authority vested by God. We confess this in Article 36 of the Belgic Confession: “He wants the world to be governed by laws and policies...for that purpose he has placed the sword in the hand of the government to punish wrongdoers ... moreover everyone, no matter of what quality, condition or rank – ought to be subject to the civil officers, pay taxes, hold them in honour and respect, and obey them in all things which do not disagree with the Word of God.” And if the government wishes to institute the death penalty, we likewise cannot use Scripture to condemn it, so long as the process is just and non-discriminatory.⁹

This brings us back to the new amendments. What is the government trying to do with our criminals? The amendments bring about some important changes to do with intentional murders. Under the old *Criminal Code*, s.278 and 279 made a distinction between wilful murder (where the prosecution had to show that the accused intended to kill the victim) and murder (where the prosecution had to show that the accused intended to do grievous bodily harm to the victim). By definition it made life difficult for the Department of Public

⁶ The italicized word “execute” is not included for emphasis, but instead that is how it appears in the NKJV. It is a word included by translators to help the flow of the text, and we should not get too caught up on the implications of the use of the word ‘execute.’

⁷ See Calvin’s Commentary on Romans 13:5. Online version used here.

⁸ While some are quite explicit: Cf Charles Hodge *Romans* The Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 1985, p.408.

⁹ This is precisely the reason why many oppose the death penalty. The Death Row process in America is a good example of the death penalty gone wrong: fraught with hypocrisies, discrimination, containing undercurrents of revenge and the way it is used to generate positive publicity in pre-election campaigning. For a succinct analysis see Robertson McQuilkin *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics* Tyndale House Publishers, 1995, pp.361-366

Prosecutions because it is very hard to prove 'intent to kill' as opposed to 'intent to do grievous bodily harm', except in the most straight-forward of cases.

So the result was that most criminals were sentenced to murder rather than wilful murder, and consequently received a lighter sentence (15-19 years imprisonment as opposed to the 20-30 years imprisonment under a wilful murder sentence). Furthermore, some of the most grisly murders were often not penalized fairly under the old sentencing regime. The reason being was that even if you tortured someone to death you could claim you only intended to hurt them, not kill them, thereby automatically knocking 10 years off your imprisonment.

Thanks to the new legislation, there is only one murder. It includes the intent to kill or do grievous bodily harm, amongst other things. And it includes a newly amended s.90 which states that life imprisonment is set at a minimum of 10 years non-parole to a maximum of 'never to be released.' This sounds good. It sounds like the government is finally cracking down on our criminals. Of course, time will tell whether our new laws will be effective.

Either way, our Free Reformed response is clear. We must include the government in our prayers, as God has placed an enormous task upon them. As stated in the Belgic Confession: "We ought to pray for them, that God may direct them in all

It appears, then, that capital punishment can be inferred from this passage as a right but not necessarily a command.

their ways and that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way (1 Tim 2:1,2)." One day everyone will be facing God's judgement and then each will get their just reward.

The editorial would welcome letters to the editor on this issue. The author has not exhausted the topic, and much more could be said regarding sub-topics such as rehabilitation and the concept of restorative justice.

Brendan Pitlo

SPYSC REVIEW:

PROMISE AND REALITY IN CHINA, THE HOST OF THE 2008 OLYMPIC GAMES

What are the first things that come to mind when you think of China? Do you think of a vast, beautiful countryside, the primitive living standards, the 1.3 billion people, the smog, and the vibrancy of its cities? Or like many people do you think of its human rights abuses, history of massacres, and persecution of Christians? Well, you probably didn't know that in 2001, in their bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games, China promised the world that by giving this country the rights to host the Olympics, it would be helping it improve its human rights record. Did they fulfil this promise? At the SPYSC Annual General Meeting with the Youth Clubs our speakers Miss

Geraldine Plug and Miss Janine Mulder gave a speech on the history and current events in China.

They began with an overview of human rights, showing how we in the western world focus on civil and political rights, such as freedom of speech, freedom to change government (democracy), and freedom of religion. But the Chinese focus on economic rights, such as the right to food, shelter, and a job for every citizen. They say that the US fails in basic human rights because it is not safe to walk the streets of its cities at night. And who says that the use of torture and abortion shouldn't be mandatory if it

“By Man Shall His Blood Be Shed”? (continued)

means that each citizen can have a job? The atheists can have nothing to say to this argument. But we know that God created the earth, and thus He sets our “rights”. We have a right to work, a right to rest, and a right to live by His laws. In the Old Testament God set the laws of politics and justice, commanding judges to show no partiality. He also commanded us to love our neighbours, even to love our enemies. Thus we must fight for the rights of our neighbours whilst denying our own. This is completely different from worldly ideas of human rights that forget about the ‘responsibility’ of people.

The current communist regime began after the Communists won a civil war in 1950. Under the rule of Mao Zedong, China was united like nothing before. But things were not rosy. Private ownership was abolished and major landholders were persecuted, along with Christians and other religious groups that the government considered to be a threat. The government’s policies were often counterproductive.

However in 1976 Mao Zedong died, leading to a new era for Communist China. Now under Ding Xiaoping, capitalism was embraced and combined with communism. Private ownership was not only accepted but encouraged, and the new Chinese dream was to obtain the “8 bigs”, including owning a TV, fridge, and other things that we take for granted. Over the years since, China’s economy and prosperity has grown in leaps and bounds.

But have human rights grown with the economy? No, the communist party has always held on very tightly to power. By 1989, China was growing, and people were getting richer. The other bastion of communism, the Soviet Union, was nearly bankrupt. But in May of that year, students began to protest, gathering in the main square of Beijing, known as Tiananmen. “Riches mean nothing”, they said, “if we don’t have the right to vote, democracy, and freedom of speech.” Students poured in from all over China until there were hundreds of thousands gathered. The world held its breath and waited. Would this be the end of communism also in China? But the government had no intention of giving in, although they

pretended to listen. While the students erected a 40 foot high “goddess of democracy” the army was mobilised. On June 3rd tanks rolled in and opened fire on the peacefully protesting students. No one knows how many died, but in the end it was clear communism was here to stay in China.

The communist government is very opposed to Christianity and any religion that does not worship the state as god. However lately it has come to see that religion is important for many people, so it organises state-controlled churches. The State-Christian church is legal, heavily legislated, and subscribers must acknowledge their submission to the state first, then God. Christians are not the only ones persecuted. The Tibetans who follow the Dalai Lama have been in the news recently thanks to renewed persecution and protests. The Eastern meditation group ‘Falun Gong’ has been heavily persecuted since 1999. They are peaceful and it is difficult to see how they could be dangerous, but the movement was becoming extremely popular in China, and when the government realised it was out of its control, it cracked down. Tens of thousands of those following Falun Gong were executed or sent to labour camps or mental hospitals for ‘re-education’. Other Chinese abuses include the environment which is heavily polluted by its industry. The infamous one child policy is still enforced by heavy fines and penalties, forced abortion and infanticide.

Hosting the Olympics was supposed to be a chance for the Chinese to prove to the world how far they had come. This was never going to be hard because China is famous for its massive infrastructure work. However since 1996 the focus of the Olympics has been world peace and freedom. And everyone knew China’s human rights abuses. But in 2001 when making their bid for the Olympic Games, Liu Jingmin the vice chairman of the Chinese Olympic committee said, “By allowing Beijing to host the Games you will help the development of human rights”. In response, Jacques Rogge the president of the International Olympic Committee said in 2002, “We are convinced that the Olympic Games will improve the human rights record in China. We are taking the bet that in 7 years there will be

*As Christians we already live in complete freedom.
The human way of looking at freedom is wrong.*

many improvements". So have there been many improvements? No, unfortunately the IOC lost that bet, there has been no improvement; in fact in 2007 Amnesty International reported that abuses in China have gotten worse over the past 7 years. Abuses in the Darfur, Sudan and Tibet continue. Well over 1 million of China's own people have been displaced without compensation by Olympic construction, many of them now living on the streets and under bridges. Of the journalists currently in jail 90% were arrested after 2001. Abuse and torture is common, and any Chinese citizen can be arrested for 4 years without trial. So unfortunately the Olympics have not put to rest Chinese abuses, they have made them bigger.

What is the international response to all this? The West has generally ignored human rights abuses in China, as it was a useful ally against the Soviet Union. But especially after the Tiananmen Square massacre, human rights abuses are obvious. Why does the West still not act? Countries like the US and Australia do too much business with China to want to risk their relationship. They also approach the situation with the flawed logic that with the embrace of capitalism in China, democracy cannot be far behind; that as the Chinese get richer they will not be happy with more choices of coffee than political parties. US President George

Bush has constantly expressed optimism for China, and does not include it in his lists of undemocratic countries. But the fact the Chinese have embraced communism is not everything. The middle-class consists almost wholly of those in the cities, and there are 900 million in the country. Thirty three percent of Chinese citizens live on less than \$2 per day.

As the Olympics approach, China puts on a good face. Foreign journalists in Beijing are experiencing unprecedented freedom. But in the background there are still many abuses. The real test is not August 2008. Of course during the Olympics things will be good. The real test will be 2009 and 2010 when the world once again turns its back.

We are heading towards a judgement that will sort out wrongs once and for all. But as Christians we already live in complete freedom. The human way of looking at freedom is wrong. We are really free not when we do what we want, but when we keep the rules God set. We are free to love God and our neighbour. We are free because we believe that nothing, not even persecution like Chinese Christians experience, can separate us from the love of God.

Ben Schoof

MINISTERING IN CASUARINA PRISON

No sleep-in today as the alarm goes off at 7.30am on Saturday morning. Time to get up for the fortnightly visit to Casuarina Prison. Today it is my turn to bring the message.

I have planned a series of messages on the basics of Christianity i.e. fall into sin, God's plan for salvation, Christ's ultimate sacrifice, our response to His love. I am scheduled to bring the Word every 3rd visit.

This morning's topic is thus the fall into sin. This story I will deliver as a Bible Story brought at an adult level. We all love to hear a good story and the aim of today's story is to bring God's Word in a personal way at a level that prisoners will be able understand and connect with.

I arrive in the Prison car park to see that some of the other Prison Fellowship team members have already arrived. Casuarina has 2 teams visiting on alternative Saturday mornings. My team consists of about 5 to 6 members with about 4 to 5 arriving on any one visit.

Ministering in Casuarina Prison (continued)

We are usually made to feel welcome by the prison guards and our team is given special security privileges due to the positive track record Prison Fellowship has demonstrated over the years. Once we are given security clearances, the many prison doors open to allow us to make our way to the centre of the prison where the chapel is located. Bob is already waiting, welcoming us to this highlight of his week. Our personal guard unlocks the chapel and the chairs are setup in a large circle with Bibles and song book placed on every seat.

We then stand in a circle and ask our Heavenly Father that he may open the hearts of the prisoners to His word and that they may come to recognize that salvation only is possible through Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

Les is a very able musician, and he tunes his guitar while the prisoners arrive. The regulars are very happy to see us and hand shakes and hugs are a common occurrence. We have developed relationships with many of these prisoners and they greatly appreciate our consistent efforts to bring them the Word. Often we see a new face and this person may come in timidly, while others have moved on from Casuarina or choose not to come to the fellowship meetings any more.

Kurt comes in with a beaming smile. After our discussion 14 days ago, he has been reading his Bible every day and God has granted him personal growth in faith. He wants to share with me a few verses from Corinthians which mean much to him. To witness the changes in Kurt and his personal growth in faith is just evidence that God is working here amongst these prisoners, many who have sunk to a very low point in their life.

Les leads the singing and the prisoners get a chance to nominate their favourite song. The singing is just awesome, coming straight from the heart and at a volume from about 15 persons that would surprise many.

It is now time for me to tell my Bible story. I put the story in context and briefly outline that the story begins after God had finished creating the world. As the story develops I see the interest in the faces of the prisoners. Some of them are really hanging on to my words, and a few nods here and there indicate that they are travelling with me on the journey with this Bible story.

Upon completion of the story we open the Bible to Genesis 3 and prisoners who are able and willing read a number of verses each. Time for questions this time led to a first time attendee opening up and sharing how he stumbled many times in his walk with God. He had been moved by the story. We explained to him that it is via the Word that the Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts. We encouraged him and the other prisoners to read the Bible daily and let God speak to them this way.

We then prayed with the prisoners bringing to God's throne the things that were on the prisoners' hearts and minds. A few more songs and then it's almost time leave. After the formal part of the fellowship is finished, many times a personal prayer with a prisoner takes place or some personal advice or counselling is requested and required for individuals.

With many handshakes and good-byes we move with our guard back towards the exit of the prison. It always amazes me how easy it is for us to get in and out, while it is near to impossible for any prisoners to leave. I reflect on another wonderful opportunity that God has given me to share the gospel with the prisoners, many who really hunger for the Word. He has allowed me to let my light shine here in this at times very dark place. He has allowed me to represent the Reformed faith that I hold so dear. He has allowed me to share with the prisoners some of the treasures He has entrusted to me.

General Information

Prison fellowship is conducted under the oversight of Prison Fellowship Australia (PFA). There is no other way to be involved with organised outreach to prisoners in WA prison except via PFA.

We must not, however, gloss over the fact that when working as part a Prison Fellowship team, we are working within the interdenominational structure of Prison Fellowship Australia. This may be an obstacle for some of us. I however believe that by being part of this team, God allows me to shine my faith from the Reformed perspective and if I was not present this may not happen. It is also important that anyone who works in this environment must know why he/she is Free Reformed. Interdenominational prison fellowship may never be confused with communion of saints in our local church where God has called us.

Team members must also sign their agreement with the Prison Fellowship Australia's 'Statement of Faith' which reads something like our Apostles' Creed. What is remarkable is that all presenters in the team bring the same message and I have had very little difficulty with what the other team leaders have presented to the prisoners to date. This is also partly due to the fact that the needs of the prisoners is at a very basic level i.e. the need to see their sin and misery and the understanding and acceptance of Jesus Christ as the only way of

salvation. The textbook for bringing a message is the Bible and that places us all on a solid foundation.

At the moment there are opportunities for people to join the prison fellowship teams to share the gospel also in the prisons. There are also opportunities for people to do 'one on one' visits with prisoners who have requested extra visits from the prison fellowship staff. As you can appreciate some of the prisoners are lonely in the jail, and some have burnt bridges behind themselves.

There are however some important things to note when considering taking on such a role. The first is that because prisons are segregated by gender, in Casuarina prison only male persons may be a part of the prison fellowship team.

Secondly, it is important that you are a person who is somewhat mature in faith. This may sound like an unusual statement, (what is the yard stick for measuring maturity of faith?) it is however important to consider. Whilst we can comfortably bring the gospel (that is salvation through Jesus Christ alone) with Christians from different denominations, we do differ from them in other parts of Christian doctrine. It is important that we do not lose sight of these differences, or make light of them.

*Sharing [God's Word]
will build up not only the
prisoner but also the one
bringing the gospel.*

Conclusion

We read in God's Word time and time again that God wishes us to show love and compassion to all men. We read in Matthew 25: 31 – 46, how God in His final judgement of this world will judge us on how we have dealt with our fellow men and fellow believers. We read in verse 35: "... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you took me in, I was naked and you gave me clothes, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me."

In Prison Fellowship we believe God gives us an opportunity to show care and compassion to those in WA prisons. This opportunity allows us to share with those who are wayward, the treasures of God's Word. We believe that this sharing will be to the praise of God and will build up not only the prisoner but also the one bringing the gospel.

Gerald Bergsma

Aim:

Romans 12:2 teaches all of God's people:

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

This magazine will encourage its readers to earnestly contend for the faith, and to think and act biblically, in the good traditions of the Church of all ages. Its basis is God's word, as the Church confesses in the Three Forms of Unity. It is intended for the younger members of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, and is produced in co-operation with the Una Sancta. Subscription to the Contender is automatic with subscription to the Una Sancta.

It is not meant to be exclusively for unmarried members who still attend the Youth Bible Study Clubs, but for all those who fit within the loose parameters of 16 to 30 years of age.

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