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SADDAM HUSSEIN AND CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

The 2006 Pre-Trib Study Group Conference focused on Post Modernism and dispensationalism. One of the things we learned is that Post Moderns do not believe in absolute truth, which explains why they usually talk about how they feel about things. After all if there is no absolute truth then everything is relative to how an individual feels about things. These folks are often repulsed when someone makes declarations based upon the truth of God's Word. Since Christianity is a truth-based religion, based upon God's revelation to man, then it follows that one has to believe in absolute truth. If absolute truth exists then so does universal truth, which means that something is true for all people, whether they recognize it or not.

BRIAN McLAREN AND THE EMERGING CHURCH MOVEMENT

Brian McLaren is a leader in a movement called "the emerging church," which is in step with the popular mindset of the day known as Post Modernism. Pre Modernism was a pre-Enlightenment time when things were based upon biblical revelation. Modernism came with the Enlightenment and attacked through the use of reason all of the foundations, especially those based upon the Bible. Many of you would also know of Modernism as Liberalism. What did Liberalism produce? Liberalism produced mysticism like existentialism and what is now called Post Modernism. Since Post Modernism is based upon mysticism, which values personal experience and feelings as the highest standard it undermines absolute or universal truth that applies to all people. This is why Post Moderns within the emerging church movement speak about how they feel about things and never speak of what is right or wrong. They can only speak about what they feel. Many times within these circles it is considered a virtue to "share" your feelings and a sin to speak as if something can be known as absolute truth.

A few days after the execution of Saddam Hussein, McLaren wrote an article about that event entitled, "How Does Saddam's Execution Make You Feel?"¹ The article appeared in a blog by Jim Wallis, who is a left-wing socialist, masquerading as an Evangelical, like so many today. Needless to say, McLaren said he felt "dirty" as a result of Hussein's hanging. As long as we are talking about how one felt, I was "pleased" that the butcher of Baghdad got the death sentence and it was actually carried out against someone who deserved it. McLaren even admits Hussein's guilt, . . . well somewhat. McLaren says, "But even if I supported capital punishment, I think I would still have felt dirty. Perhaps I'm too morally thin-skinned, but taking the human life of a person in the name of human life brings no sense of justice or satisfaction to me. Rather, it brings the opposite."² McLaren is saying those who support capital punishment are immoral. So God is immoral, as if McLaren has a higher moral standard than God? (God is the One who instituted capital punishment as we shall see in a moment.)

Anticipating that some might be so bold as to quote the Bible, McLaren tries to head this off at the pass by introducing a red herring. 'Some might use Bible verses to justify "eye for eye, tooth for tooth, life for life' (although Jesus seemed to put a rather authoritative spin on those verses, preceding them with "You have heard it said," and following them up with 'But I say to you...'). Whether executions are justified or not, I feel dirty and ashamed whenever I hear of an execution, and Saddam's was no

different. I hope I don't ever stop feeling that way."³ McLaren refers to a reference in the Mosaic Law, ignoring the pre-Mosaic institution of capital punishment and also Paul's support of it, and then hints that the Mosaic Law has been done away by Christ. It is true that Christ fulfilled the Law of Moses, but McLaren did not deal with the proper Scripture that is the real crux of this matter.

THE BIBLE AND CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Before the Flood man was commanded not to execute judgment upon evil as seen in the way in which God commanded mankind to deal with Cain's murder of Abel (Gen. 4:9–15). However, after the Flood God instituted capital punishment (Gen. 9:5–6) and it is for the purpose of restraining evil (Rom. 13:3–4). Lesser judicial authority is implied in the God-given command for civil institutions to exact a life for life. Even though capital punishment has grown distasteful to apostate Western culture, it is still the basis for God's establishment of civil government.⁴

Why capital punishment, especially since it was not part of God's plan before the Flood? First, let's look at God's establishment of capital punishment in Genesis 9:5–6, which says, "And surely I will require your lifeblood; from every beast I will require it. And from every man, from every man's brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man." Capital punishment was established by God *because* man was made in the image of God. What does it mean to be made in the image of God?

The image of God in man (known theologically by the Latin term *imago Dei*) is not to be understood as a special sort of spiritual quality of God bestowed upon man. Man is the image of God on earth. Man is created not in God's image, since God has no image of His own, nor does he have the image of God: but HE IS HIMSELF THE IMAGE OF GOD—created to be God's image.

Man is the visible physical image of God reflecting in physical essence the spiritual essence of God's form. The concept rightly considered may be called a "theomorphism" (*theo*=God, *morphism*=form). This is not at all to posit physical features for God, since He is Spirit, but it is a localized spiritual corporeality of which God partakes without limitation and without being incompatible with His attributes. This allows for the incarnation of Jesus as a man.

The image of God combined with the fact that God's standard of justice is retributive, which means the punishment must fit the crime or as the Bible puts it, an eye for an eye. Therefore, for God the issue is how is one able to pay for the life of another person that is taken unlawfully. The answer to the question is that one can only make retribution of the life of another by giving up their life. This is a matter of God's justice, which those on the left talk a lot about but in reality rarely display any knowledge of or desire to implement.

It appears another reason why God established capital punishment was to help restrain evil between the two great global judgments—the Flood and the Second Coming. Since God has promised that He will not intervene directly against the evil of man with another global flood (Gen. 9:8–17), and we will not intervene directly until the Second Coming, He set up the Divine Institution of human government to help restrain evil until the judgment day. It does not matter how we feel about this is what the Bible says God has done.

NEW TESTAMENT CONFIRMATION

Capital punishment did not pass away with coming of Christ as McLaren suggests. Instead, Paul makes it clear that it continues when he said in Romans 13:3–4: “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; 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 upon the one who practices evil.” The role of government is to restrain evil so that men can be productive. The terms “sword” and “wrath” speak of capital punishment, which is a means of restraining evil in a society. Paul reaffirms these things in Titus 3:1 where he says, “Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed.”

Peter also confirms the role of God-ordained civil government during the church age when he said, “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right” (1 Pet. 2:13–14). This is exactly what Paul did in Acts 25 in his defense before Festus when he said, “If then I am a wrongdoer, and have committed anything worthy of death, I do not refuse to die” (verse 11). Paul was willing to submit to capital punishment if he had done anything that called for that penalty (he had not).

CONCLUSION

I felt pleased when I heard the news that Saddam Hussein had been put to death for killing thousands of people because that was a God-ordained act. I feel “dirty” when murders go free or live their lives out because God’s Word has not been obeyed. Sure, there are miscarriages of justice, like when Hussein was in power murdering tens of thousands of people with no one able to stop him. However, our all-knowing God went ahead and instituted capital punishment even though He knew that one day a miscarriage of justice would lead to the death of His own Son on the cross. Yet, God in His wisdom and justice instituted capital punishment any way as a way to help control evil before Christ personally rules the world with a rod of iron. I know that there will be some in that day that will feel like God does not know what He is doing. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Brian McLaren, “How Does Saddam’s Execution Make You Feel?” *God’s Politics a blog by Jim Wallis and friends* (January 3, 2007), www.beliefnet.com/blogs/godspolitics/2007/01/brian-mclaren-how-does-saddams.html.

² McLaren, “Saddam’s Execution.”

³ McLaren, “Saddam’s Execution.”

⁴ See Charles A. Clough, *Laying The Foundation*, revised (Lubbock: Lubbock Bible Church, 1977), p. 83. An updated version of this can be found on www.cclough.com.