

Killing Heretics Is Wrong

For hundreds of years it was common practice for churches to put heretics to death. Throughout the centuries the Catholic Church hunted down and killed millions of people for rejecting their doctrines. When Protestant churches rose to power, they also (for a time) did exactly the same thing. For a long time people believed that those who rejected the teachings of the church should be put to death.

However, that's not what the Bible teaches. Those who did such things were guilty of murder in the sight of God, and did something that was very evil. God hasn't given the church the right to put its enemies to death.

It's true that under the Mosaic Law, God commanded Israel to put to death all those who didn't worship Him:

Deuteronomy 13:6-11: "If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend, which is as thine own soul, entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which thou hast not known, thou, nor thy fathers; Namely, of the gods of the people which are round about you, nigh unto thee, or far off from thee, from the one end of the earth even unto the other end of the earth; Thou shalt not consent unto him, nor hearken unto him; neither shall thine eye pity him, neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him: But thou shalt surely kill him; thine hand shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people. And thou shalt stone him with stones, that he die; because he hath sought to thrust thee away from the Lord thy God, which brought thee out

of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.
And all Israel shall hear, and fear, and shall do no
more any such wickedness as this is among you.”

A lot has changed since God gave this command. Christians are *not* under the Mosaic Law, and the church is not ancient Israel. When Jesus died on the cross and rose again He put an end to the entire Mosaic Law. We're not under that law anymore! Instead we're under grace:

Romans 6:14: “For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace.”

Romans 8:2: “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.”

Galatians 6:2: “Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.”

Hebrews 9:15: “And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.”

That doesn't mean we don't have to obey any commands at all. Instead Jesus has given us a new law – the law of Christ. Some parts of this new law are the same as the Mosaic Law (such as the command to not murder anyone), but other parts of it are different. For example, the law of Christ doesn't include dietary restrictions. It doesn't include animal sacrifices. Most importantly for this discussion, it also doesn't include a command to hunt down the enemies of the church and kill them. We are under a

different set of rules than those which governed ancient Israel, and those rules don't permit Christians to kill people for disagreeing with their beliefs.

The New Testament has a lot to say about what the church must do when people reject its teachings. However, it *never* says that the church has the option of putting them to death. Instead it says that the church must reject them.

For example:

Titus 3:10-11: "A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject; Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself."

Those who cling to heretical doctrines and refuse to repent must be rejected. The text doesn't say that they must be imprisoned and killed! No apostle ever did such a thing. None of the disciples ever hunted down heretics and imprisoned them. That never happened.

Likewise, those who lead lives of unrepentant sin must be removed from the church:

2 Timothy 3:5: "Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away."

1 Corinthians 5:12-13: "For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person."

Churches aren't allowed to tolerate sin in their midst. They have to do something about it – and what they must do is remove that wicked person from their midst. They have no right to imprison or execute the sinner for his sin.

The apostles rebuked sin and condemned it, but they didn't prosecute it. When Simon the sorcerer tried to purchase the Holy Spirit, Peter rebuked him:

Acts 8:20: “But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money.”

Notice that Peter didn't put him to death for sinning! Instead the apostle rebuked him for the evil thing he had done. None of the apostles ever called for the imprisonment of those who disagreed with them.

It's true there were times when *God* put people to death for sinning. For example:

Acts 5:3-6: “But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God. And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things. And the young men arose, wound him up, and carried him out, and buried him.”

In this story Peter didn't lay hands on Ananias, drag him out of the city, and stone him with stones until he died. Instead Peter told him that he had lied to God, and God then killed him on the spot. Peter wasn't the one who killed him. In fact, Peter didn't even ask God to kill him! The only thing Peter did was tell him that he had lied, and God then killed him. Peter never touched him.

Likewise, the apostle Paul never had anyone imprisoned

or executed for rejecting the doctrines of Christ. The most that he did was this:

1 Timothy 1:20: “Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.”

Since those two men refused to listen to God, Paul turned them over to the devil. That is something that will happen to all those who reject God – because those who reject Him are the children of the devil and are doing his work.

Paul spoke of people who were wicked and did terrible things. However, he never taught that such people were to be killed. Instead he said that the church should rebuke them sharply so that they might repent and be sound in the faith:

Titus 1:10-14: “For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake. One of themselves, even a prophet of their own, said, the Cretians are alway liars, evil beasts, slow bellies. This witness is true. Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith; Not giving heed to Jewish fables, and commandments of men, that turn from the truth.”

Paul easily could have said that Christians should look for ways to imprison and kill its enemies, but he didn't. That idea was never taught to the church, and is something the church must not do.

It's true that one day God will gather all of the wicked and judge them. It's also true that the church must not tolerate wicked people in its midst. Evildoers must be rebuked and removed from

the congregation – but the church has no right to go further than that. God hasn't given the church the right to put heretics to death¹.

1 Nor has God given the church the right to turn heretics over to the government so that it can put them to death. When the church uses the government to kill people, it's no different from the church doing it themselves.