

Pentecostalism and the Death Penalty: Some Ethical Reflections

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In the context of a Conference of Pentecostals in Europe, this particular topic may seem to be a bit off base. After all, the question of the death penalty is not a concern for most of you. Most of continental Europe has abolished this practice of capital punishment of criminals. But in the context of the United States, the issue has been one of divisiveness between Christian communities, for proponents of the death penalty, and for those against it. Perhaps now we have the most interesting foil of all is the current chief law enforcement official in the United States, Attorney General John Ashcroft. A third Generation Pentecostal, from a family rooted in the Assemblies of God, Ashcroft is the second Assemblies of God member to hold a high position within the United States government (James Watt was the other). Ashcroft faced a grueling approvals process from both the house and The Senate, with many questions focusing in on his Pentecostal beliefs and how he would administer the responsibilities of his office. Questions centered on his beliefs on the death penalty, abortion, civil rights, gun control and crime. At times, many of his answers, specifically on the Death penalty, veered from what AG denominational statements said (or in some cases, did not say, or remained silent.)^[1] Despite intense media scrutiny, email and letter writing campaigns for and against his appointment, Ashcroft is now the Attorney general of the U.S. Recently, Ashcroft presided over the first federal execution in over 20 years, that of Oklahoma Bomber Timothy McVeigh.

I daresay that John Ashcroft does not represent the sum total of what Pentecostals or the Assemblies of God even think on the issue of the death penalty. But I would like to use Mr. Ashcroft as a foil for the subject of the Death Penalty. Ashcroft, while third Generation Pentecostal, embodies some of the old school and new school Pentecostalism sensibilities within his positions of piety and government that he speaks of on a regular basis. He shows the tension within himself as a Spirit-filled believer, but an evangelical pragmatist convinced that although the government is bad, his presence as a Christian can effect a change. And he also embraced the duality of Pentecostalism within the United States that can be so life affirming, testifying to the changing power of Jesus Christ and the spirit, yet bound by interlocking and interweaving theologies that are not really Pentecostal. They are an amalgamation of an Evangelical theology that is not in keeping with historic Pentecostalism. This perhaps, is the most intriguing to me as historian, the trajectory of the ethical change in Pentecostal beliefs specifically in North America, from Pacifism and life affirming to Calvinistic punishment and retribution. What could have caused this change? Why is it, that certain groups of Pentecostals in the Americas can support the death penalty while others oppose it? Is there something to Pentecostal theology and ethics that should respond to issues of life affirmation, justice, retribution and reconciliation? In my opinion Pentecostals should not support the death penalty as the renewing work of the spirit precludes the impetus for retributive justice meted out by man or the law. I am sure many would disagree, however, this discussion will by no means solve the ethical dilemmas of Pentecostals in the US. What I do hope is that it will provide a means of discussion and debate for those you who have access to denominational schools and leadership. For those of you from Europe, I hope that you can influence your U.S. Pentecostal friends to revisit this topic in a different light.

In order to put these issues ?out on the table? so to speak, I will start by a brief history of Pentecostals and issues regarding death as administered by sanction of governmental authority, a view of the accomodationist and evangelical tendencies that allow Pentecostals to embrace a support of the Death penalty, and end with some Theological and ethical justifications for and against the death penalty that are embraced by

Pentecostals.

Death and Pentecostals historically

If one slew with hatred, it was a sin., but if one slew with duly constituted authority, it was not a sin ..
E.N. Bell, Assemblies of God

Though it was to WWI that Bell refers to in this quote, it is perhaps a telling statement as to how early Pentecostals wrestled with the ethics of inflicting mortal wounds. Early Pentecostals eschatology precluded involvement with affair of the State. Historian Grant Wacker writes in his new book, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture*, that he could only find two early Pentecostals that had ever held some type of political office.[2] Pentecostals concerns with the immanent return of Christ precluded any interference with affairs of state. Affairs of the church, however, were more apt to arouse feelings of retribution for such crimes as standing in each other pulpits and trying to steal ministries. Other leaders who espoused differing Pentecostal doctrines such as Durham's finished work doctrine were commented upon in the same vein when they met their untimely demises. Their deaths were spoken of as punishments from God. Pentecostals may not have advocated the traditional ?death penalty in a sense, but they were apt to pray for it for those who opposed their particular theologies.

As to early Pentecostal ideas about the death penalty, it remains a mostly silent issue. Though many Pentecostals hailed from the southern parts of the United States, and had probably seen a lynching or the effects of one, they are silent about the issue of the government's responsibility for punishing criminals. The best place to look for Pentecostals support or objections to governmental intervention into termination of life is to their stance on war. War, specifically WWI , provided an impetus for Pentecostals to speak on the issue of the governments role in extracting the ultimate punishment.

Early Pentecostals had some reservations when it came to the government's involvement with the sanctioning of death, specifically in war. At the onset of WWI, Pentecostals attitudes towards the U.S. governments intervention were a either outright pacifism and indifference. Early Pentecostals like Charles Parham, Frank Bartelman, and Stanley S. Frodsham spoke against killing on behalf of any nation, including the United States.[3] What caused their opposition was not necessarily theological or biblical, but depended on their positions on the role of government, sympathies for the German cause, or selective judgments.

Denominationally, the path proved to be more treacherous, depending on what stance was taken. Holiness Pentecostal denominations such as the Church of God in Christ had a policy against the shedding of blood in any form violated the teachings of Jesus. Denominational Leader CH. Mason and other members received tremendous scrutiny from the BOI , what is now the FBI, as to statements that they preached against participation in the war and the subject of killing on behalf of the government[4] Mason himself was arrested and one of his members tarred and feathered for preaching against the War.. The Church of God Cleveland's leader A.J. Tomlison spoke out against killing in wartime situations, yet even he acknowledged his confusion in a essay called ?Perplexing Times?, in which he stated that he could not kill another human being in a military officer told him to, but that he could not say that others should do the dame thing.[5]

For John Ashcroft's denomination, the Assemblies of God, the matter was in the beginning, clear cut, but by the end of the war, not so clear. Prior to the American intervention in WWI, the AG had embraced for the most part , a stance of Pacifism. Upon entering the war in 1917, however, the position of the AG began to change. 28 days after the US declared war on Germany, the executive presbyters sent out a resolution regarding combatant military service, declaring their loyalty to the United States Government,. However, they

qualified their statement by saying the denomination was ? nevertheless constrained to declare we cannot conscientiously participate in war and armed resistance which involves the actual destruction of human life. This statement allowed the AG to qualify the church as a pacifist denomination, so that they can allow members to apply for non-combatant status. [6] The sway of popular opinion, however, began to change the denominations stance, as ministers scrambled to interpret the resolution for the members. What resulted was a change in how the AG viewed their relationship to God and the government. Where they had started out as pacifist, by the end of the war, E. N. Bell wrote that the morality of killing depended upon the motive. If one slew with hatred, it was a sin, but if one slew on behalf of duly constituted authority it was not sin. Later, Bell elaborate on this statement to say that there was no sin in killing if necessary to rescue those who are being oppressed.[7]

One could say that this attitude mirrors that of John Ashcroft, Attorney general of the United States, who last month oversaw the first federal execution since 1963, that of Timothy McViegh. McViegh was convicted of the Oklahoma City bombing in April 1995, and sentenced to death. Though some FBI misplaced documents postponed the execution of McViegh until June of 2001, Ashcroft maintained that there would be no reprieve for McViegh. Ashcroft, additionally, provided by request of some of the victims families, a closed-circuit television broadcast of the execution to be beamed to Oklahoma city to accommodate those survivors and family members of the victims to watch the execution. Stating ?the Oklahoma City Survivors may be the largest group of crime victims in our history, The Department of Justice must make special provisions to assist the needs of the survivors and the victims families?[8] Describing his somewhat emotional meeting with the victims, he relates: ? My time with these brave survivors changed me. What was taken from them can never be replaced nor fully resorted. I hope we can help them meet their needs to close this chapter in their lives.?

One can respect the compassion in which Ashcroft viewed the families and friends of the victims of the bombing. However, he is firmly entrenched with the conviction that the death of Timothy McViegh is righteous, even just, and does not view this as in conflict with his Pentecostal beliefs. Ashcroft on the one hand is to be commended for his compassionate response to the victims on the one hand, but as an agent of the government, upholding the law, he is at his most politic, yet vulnerable to scrutiny. Ashcroft is very vocal and forthright about his Christian beliefs, even holding morning prayer for his staffers called RAMP (Read, argue, memorize and pray) . For many liberals in the United States, Ashcroft?s seeming disjunction between promising to uphold the laws of the United States, but at the same time holding prayer and bible study in the rooms of the Justice Department blurs the treasured boundaries between church and state. But perhaps the indictment is more telling when Ashcroft , in an interview conducted by Time Magazine, led Time interviewers into a room in the Justice department to show them a wall relief. The relief depicts King Solomon deciding the parentage of an infant, from I Kings 3:16-27. Ashcroft?s remark about the painting was that ?Wisdom in making good decisions can be inspired as well as acquired?.

Perhaps Ashcroft would do well to remember the end of the Solomon story. When pressed by one mother to divide the child up and kill it, the other mother, pleads that Solomon give the child to the other woman to spare the child?s life. Solomon, in turn, awards the child to the mother who asked for life rather than death. Ashcroft?s truncated understanding of Solomon?s wisdom provides an interesting segue way into how Pentecostals have perhaps acquiesced to a religious mindset that is not in keeping with what Pentecostal theology really is. From a beginning in which Pentecostals could cast themselves in a more pacifistic light, the specter of WWI and WWII changed, along with most Americans, the role of suffering and death for the cost of freedom. Denominations like the Church of God in Christ, who in WWI were pacifists, became staunch supporters of the war effort in WWII. Letters abounded in the denominational Newspaper the Whole Truth about

those who were fighting for the cause, and for those who had given their lives in War. The Assemblies of God also feel in line with the war effort. The opposition to the shedding of blood was no longer mentioned in denominational literature of the time. The other factor that perhaps played a big role in Pentecostals and specifically the Assemblies, changed their way of thinking, was their associations with the National association of Evangelicals, and the Pentecostal Fellowship of north America, not the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches of north America. Interaction, specifically with the NAE, cause a shift in Pentecostal perceptions and theology, instead of focusing in on the restorative work of the spirit in dealing with sin, the focus changed to a more Calvinistic perspective on grace and the human condition. The NAE also affirms the use of capital punishment as a means of disciplining criminals. [9]The manner in which Protestants understand nature and grace precludes that there is any affirmation of the worth, beauty and good in all of creation, according to T. Richard Snyder, author of the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Punishment. [10] Therefore, when the creation, or in our case, a person, commits a crime, that creation can never be good, but is somehow tainted or bad. The effect of sin has corrupted the entire creation so much that the sinner, though proclaimed to have grace if having faith in Jesus Christ, is tainted by that act of sin, and must pay retribution for it. If one is deviant, and a criminal, then there must be something that is unregenerate about them, and unredeemable. Hence, the punishment of a person with the ultimate punishment, death, is desirable to rid the creation of the abhorrence. Secondly the nature of redemptive grace is derived though individualistic, rather than corporate or communal grace. Therefore the one who sins, or fallen from grace, is separated from the institutions or circumstances that created the sin, and is solely held responsible for the turn of events that has occurred, and therefore, stands to receive the penalty for falling from grace.

It would seem therefore, that for some U.S. Pentecostals, Snyder's description of a lack of understanding of grace has crept into both the political, theological and ethical understandings of American Pentecostals. (can we find % or Pentecostals who believe in death penalty??) By embracing the T in the TULIP, total depravity, we have brought a line that prohibits the all-encompassing work of the Spirit to cleanse, rejuvenate, create and renew. That isn't what Pentecostals are about at all, it seems. If we are to take the prophecy of Joel that the spirit is to be poured out on all flesh, then it seems that there is no distinction between flesh. The flesh itself is not inherently bad, it is a creation of God, and therefore, all are able to receive it. Some of us forget that there are spirit filled tongue- speaking Pentecostals on death Row. We may like to overlook that fact, but they are there just the same. The arguments that can be made biblically for and against capital punishment (and I will not go into these in depth at this time) both find strong support in scripture. Those who support the Death penalty usually focus in upon Genesis 9: 6 as their authoritative text : Who shed's man's blood will have his blood shed? Those against the death penalty focus upon Jesus's teachings and the cross, in such passages as Matthew 26:52: Who lives by the sword will die by the sword. Jesus' teachings specifically the Sermon on the Mount, call for love, forgiveness and compassion, not retribution.[11]

Yet one fact does remain clear. The very Jesus who we embrace was a victim of capital punishment imposed by the state, the Romans. Yet he was innocent. Theologically, this can be justified by the fact that this death can redeem all the sins of humankind. The death itself was a act of redemption, not the retribution that the Roman government sought or the Jewish officials hoped for. Do our actions in sentencing people to death for crimes committed provide redemption? Not always. The case of Timothy McViegh is a good example. Knowing death was near, he did not express sorrow for his actions, but rather, referred to his death as the eventual end of his being "the Captain of his fate, the master of his destiny". The 19 children killed, were merely collateral damage. Those family members of victims who watched the execution claimed that the execution gave them a sense of closure or peace. Yet the execution did not bring their loved ones back. It did not provide the possibility that MC Veigh could express remorse for his actions, or repentance, or rehabilitation that a life imprisonment without parole could have brought. It was an act of retributive justice by the state, presided over

by an official who happened to be Pentecostal, who believed that by following the governmental laws, he was perhaps, also following God law. Early Pentecostals, and even Ashcroft himself, however, would affirm that there is even a higher law, God's law. So how should Pentecostals ethically respond to capital punishment?

First of all, Pentecostals should acknowledge the sanctity of life for all, not just the unborn. Our Ethic in the US is well developed on the right to life vs abortion, and you will find very few Pentecostals supporting abortion. We must extend this right to life to those who are criminals as well. By supporting the death penalty, we give the state or the US government the right that ultimately belongs to God to extract the absolute punishment, death. We embrace a doctrine of Predestination when our theological roots are more Arminian in nature. If we do believe that a person has a choice to accept Jesus or not, then who are we to interrupt the process of possible regeneration? The case of inmate Karla Faye Tucker in Texas was an example of how Pentecostals, Charismatic, and other evangelicals were challenged about their thinking on the Death Penalty. Tucker, on drugs, put a pickaxe through the chest of one of the two victims she murdered for drug money along with her boyfriend. Sentenced to death, soon after arriving in Huntsville Texas she became a born-again Christian, and her life completely changed. That fact was not enough to save her from lethal injection. Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and others championed her cause for a stay of execution, which failed. Robertson, in speaking of Tucker before the execution, said, "She is not the same person who committed those heinous murders. She is totally transformed, and I think to execute her is more of an act of vengeance than it is appropriate justice."

Robertson's argument is a useful one in formulating an ethic of a Pentecostal ethic of life. She had a transformative experience. Other death row inmates have had similar experiences, but I believe that the fact that Karla Faye Tucker was white and a woman caused former hardliners like Robertson and Falwell to rethink their positions. A soft-spoken woman who witnessed on Death row, Tucker was not the hardened criminal of color we are so used to seeing on US television. Instead, she looked like a Sunday school teacher. To God, those who are on death row all look like Karla Faye Tucker, people who can be rehabilitated and redeemed.

Secondly, if the work of the Spirit is to convict, we need to allow the possibility for the Holy Spirit to bring criminals to repentance, though our effective witness. If we truly do believe that the infilling of the Holy Spirit can cause change, then we should be mindful that the only way that change can be brought about is through witness. One of the stories that I read in doing research for this paper recounted a death row inmate who converted to Druidism after being in a Christian church. At his last meal, attended by both of his parents, he remarked that no one from his church had bothered to visit him, but that when he became interested in Druidism, the Druids had come to see him in prison. As a result, his parents joined them as well. If we are absent from those who are the most abhorrent in our society, then the work of the Spirit, Peace, longsuffering patience, cannot be extended to those who need it the most. The work of the Spirit cannot be done in a vacuum, the people of God need to be present so that the transformative work can begin.

Finally, some attention must be paid to our formulation of theological ethics. We have very few Pentecostal ethicists engaging in topics such as the death penalty, but we have plenty of moral admonitions and rules we expect Pentecostals to adhere to regarding behavior. We do not have a basis to articulate clearly our beliefs in such a manner that appeal to an ethic of life or responsible behavior. While prohibitions on sex, dress, smoking and alcohol consumption are rampant, we do not give the same amount of time to issues of criminal behavior, sanctity of life for those who are guilty, or attempting to make systemic changes in the systems that we claim are not of God. Mr. Ashcroft, prior to his confirmation, received much criticism for the comments that he made at Bob Jones University, saying that we as Christians have no King, but King Jesus. If King Jesus is truly king, some points need to be considered. Our King was a convicted criminal, sentenced to die. Our King supported non-violent response, even in his most critical moments. Our King, Jesus, calls us to a higher kingdom and accountability. We must move from an individualistic expression of Faith, especially in the United

States, to a more communal expression of the importance of the work of the Holy Spirit to cleanse and convict those that we perceive can not be rehabilitated. It is not enough simply to be a Pentecostal. One must live out Pentecost in everyday life,. Until we can begin to think, rather than react, on the issue of the Death penalty in the United States, we will miss many chances to give life to those who have been handed the sentence of death.

[1] The Assemblies of God does not have a formal position paper on the Death penalty; neither do the Church of God in Christ, or the Church of God Cleveland. The National Association of Evangelicals, which many U.S. based Pentecostals denominations are members of, have a statement that supports capital punishment. See J. Gordon Melton, *The Churches speak on: Capital Punishment*, Abingdon, 1997.

(introduction)

[2] Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture*, Harvard, 200, p. 220

[3] Ibid, p. 243

[4] Kornweibel. Theodore, Bishop C.H. Mason and the Church of God in Christ During WWI: The perils of Conscientious Objection, *Southern Studies*, 26 (Fall 1987) 275

[5] Wacker, p. 249

[6] Wacker, 244

[7] Ibid, p 246

[8] New York Times, April 13, 2001 "Ashcroft Calls Seeing mcVeigh die a way to help Victims Kin", A. 12

[9] Melton, p v.

[10] Snyder, T. Richard, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Punishments*, Eerdmans, 2000, p12

[11] Stassen, Glen, "Back to Jesus? way?", *Sojourners*, Washington Nov/Dec2000, p 14-15