

What Would Jesus Do About the Death Penalty?

by Joe Neil Clayton

Recently C-span carried a speech by Alan Keyes to an audience in Virginia. Mr. Keyes, a respected columnist, orator, and candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, captivated his hearers with a lecture on the causes and cures for the moral collapse in our country.

Part of the cause, he stated, was the replacement of God-generated moral instruction by the prominence of the theory of evolution in the educational system (justified by the principle of the separation of church and state).

Evolution, as everyone knows, thrives on the Darwinian maxim of the survival of the fittest. Mr. Keyes showed several ways in which this theory had made life cheap in the 20th century. Fratricide, genocide, and total war with harm to the innocent are only a few. He went further to say that, in his opinion, the claim that a woman has power over her body to the point that she can abort her unborn child is also one of these. This amounted to the tyranny of the one who had the power over the powerless. It was a case of might-makes-right, a precept very close to the survival of the fittest.

His stand on the right-to-life issue is well known. He is a Catholic, and his views coincide with the stance of that church. However, in this instance, we agree with him. Abortion is an insidious evil that has blighted our society for many years. Yet, Mr. Keyes also favors the death penalty for crimes worthy of it. This seemed inconsistent to one of his questioners at the close of his appearance. A young Catholic student agreed with him on abortion, but opposed his stand on the death penalty. The answer which Mr. Keyes gave was very astute, in my judgment.

First, he said there was no inconsistency in believing that the innocent have a right to life, and the guilty must be subject to penalty for their crimes, even if it is the death penalty. He told the young man that the two issues were not both apples: one was apple, the other orange.

Next, he said the death penalty was Scriptural. This is an area where he is different from other candidates. He cannot separate morals from God. His approach to the question was interesting, if not unique. To show that Scripture approved the death penalty, he first took advantage of the fad that has spread through young believers, use of the initials WWJD, standing for "What Would Jesus Do?." He asked, "What DID Jesus do?," and paused (for effect, I believe). He answered for his audience, "He accepted it!" God has proclaimed that the penalty for sin is death, and sent Jesus to the cross, bearing the sins of the guilty. By accepting the penalty, Jesus approved of it.

Again, when he stood before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, Jesus gave an answer that confirmed his readiness to defend the death penalty meted out by government.

Pilate said to the reticent Jesus, "Are you not speaking to me? Do you not know that I have power to crucify you, and power to release you?"

Jesus could have answered with the voice of those today who vehemently oppose the death penalty in all cases, "No government has the right to take life."

Or, He could have said, "It is wrong to put an innocent person to death."

He gave neither of these answers. He said, "You could have no power at all against me, unless it had been given you from above." He did not mean the Emperor. He meant that the authority came from God (John 19:8-11). This, of course, coincides with Romans 13:1-7, where Paul shows that governments derive their power from God, and are instruments used by Him to punish the evildoer, with the SWORD, if necessary. Mr. Keyes did not use Romans 13 in his response, but it readily applies to the question, since Jesus approved the use of the death penalty.

He did not use another passage that pertains to "what Jesus would do" in the case. The woman taken in adultery was brought before Jesus for summary judgment. The witnesses wanted him to approve the mandate of Moses to stone her to death. Aside from the fact that the male adulterer in the case was not also brought, Jesus had a ready answer. "Let him who is without sin among you first cast a stone at her."

The witnesses also knew that the Law of Moses required that the hands of the witnesses must be the first to cast stones to put the guilty to death (Deuteronomy 17:7). Jesus would not stand in the way of a lawful judgment against the adulteress. He only reminded the accusers of the proper procedure. Jesus' interpretation of this law set the stage for the forgiveness of the woman, on the condition that she would not sin again (John 8:1-11).

It was refreshing to hear a public figure lecture an audience on a moral subject, using Scripture for the basis of his conviction. Even though Mr. Keyes is a Catholic, this trait in him is admirable. It is also admirable in every believer of truth. No position on any subject is valid without the authority of Scripture behind it. "Buy the truth, and sell it not."