

## Christianity and Torture (Part 1)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*  
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*This column is the first segment of a two-part series dealing with Christianity and torture.*

Contemporary Christians face many ethical dilemmas regarding Christian reaction to public policies of self-defense, capital punishment and, especially, the use of torture. Jesus Christ was tortured by the state. He was scourged, humiliated, had his beard plucked out, was forced to bear his own cross, and was ultimately cruelly executed by crucifixion.<sup>1</sup> Yet was such state practice something to be emulated by Christians or a practice that they should condone? While torture is part of God's overall plan for the ages, it does not seem to be part of His plan for the present age. One day, Christ will return and deliver all the workers of iniquity to the torturers for eternity in hell (Matthew 18:34). But on earth neither He nor his followers practiced retribution in the form of torturing other men for any reason. Indeed, at least in terms of earthly retribution and vengeance, the Apostle Paul exhorts Christians: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:29).

The exclusion of torture as part of God's plan when Christ walked the earth was evident. God was even merciful to the demons: "And suddenly they [the demons] cried out, saying, 'What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?'" (Matthew 8:29). Jesus did not torment them immediately. In a similar passage: "And he [a demon] cried out with a loud voice and said, 'What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore You by God that You do not torment me'" (Mark 5:7). Why Jesus was so merciful to demons may be somewhat of a mystery. But given the way that He treated His enemies, should not Christians also take their cue from Christ? How can Christians back state policies that deal with other men's lives so cavalierly?

Here is the Christian's calling: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). There is no mention of either cruelty or torture as part of those good works or shining light. Remember the golden rule: "And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise" (Luke 6:31). Self-defense is both necessary and justifiable in a fallen world (Luke 22:36, etc.). But there is no indication in Scripture that Christians may be cruel or use torture in order to find out about potential threats or to gather other information—especially not information to promote the state's proactive policies and wars. Information gathering may be part of warfare but wartime conditions are no excuse for acting unethically or sinfully. For example, General Sherman's soldiers were not exonerated from their crimes of raping southern women by virtue of the fact that a state of war existed. Christians must not condone cruel, vindictive, barbaric, humiliating, or sadistic practices. Biblical principles stand against cruelty: "A righteous man regards the life of his animal, but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel" (Proverbs 12:10). So then are captured soldiers or suspected terrorists—even if they are proven aggressors—deserving of worse treatment than farm animals? Christians are called to a higher standard of behavior—even in exercising self-defense, conducting war, and carrying out capital punishment.

Accordingly, the Founders were wise and biblical when they prescribed in the Eighth Amendment: "Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, *nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.*" Likewise, the *Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War* (1949) correctly censured torture (in Articles 3, 17, 87 and 130). "Persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed hors de combat by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause, shall in all circumstances be treated humanely, without any adverse distinction founded on race, colour, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria. To this end the following acts are and shall remain prohibited at any time and in any place what-

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<sup>1</sup> Rough interaction with the state is part of the Christian life: "But take heed to yourselves: for they shall deliver you up to councils; and in the synagogues ye shall be beaten: and ye shall be brought before rulers and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them" (Mark 13:9 KJV). Also: "Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake" (Matthew 24:9 KJV). Such was the lot of all of the Apostles and countless Christians, along with the Old Testament prophets.

soever with respect to the above-mentioned persons: (a) Violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, *cruel treatment and torture*; (b) Taking of hostages; (c) Outrages upon personal dignity, in particular, *humiliating and degrading treatment*; (d) The passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court affording all the judicial guarantees which are recognized as indispensable by civilized peoples” (Article 3, emphasis added). “*No physical or mental torture*, nor any other form of coercion, may be inflicted on prisoners of war to secure from them information of any kind whatever. Prisoners of war who refuse to answer may not be threatened, insulted, or *exposed to any unpleasant or disadvantageous treatment of any kind*” (Article 17, emphasis added). Christians should be active advocates of biblical principles in reactive public policies, rejecting torture, and heralding the virtues of the Eighth Amendment and the Geneva Convention.

## Christianity and Torture (Part 2)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*  
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*This column is the second segment of a two-part series dealing with Christianity and torture.*

If someone is attacking you then you may kill or disable him. Self-defense is a biblical principle. However, you may not toy with him as with a spider dangled over a candle’s flame. Sadism is not a biblical ideal for Christian practice. All men—even captured soldiers in aggressing armies, criminals, and terrorists—are created in the image of God and must be respected.

Thus, captured soldiers should not be tortured. Once an aggressor is captured then he is no longer a threat. He may be executed when doing so is the just penalty for his crimes but he must not be tortured. Do unto him as you would have him do unto you if you were the one captured. As well, remember that most soldiers in aggressive actions are conscripted by states and may not share the philosophical goals of their rulers. They may not want to fight but are doing so to save their lives from state tyranny. This fact should at least be a mitigating circumstance in many cases that gives us further reason to shun the practice of torturing captives.

Terrorists and men who commit capital crimes should be executed without cruelty. Capital punishment for murder could be an acceptable practice (Genesis 9:6), although its administration by the wayward state must always be suspect. Indeed, Christians should be wary of public policies promoting the death penalty—especially when administered by states rather than local judges with local jury trials. Why should Christians trust the state to do justice? States have been the greatest distorters of justice in history! Nevertheless, if capital punishment is to be advocated by Christians, execution by torture or cruelty must not be condoned.

Remember that the enemies of Christ—rather than Christians—practice cruelty and torture. “Consider my enemies, for they are many; and they hate me with cruel hatred” (Psalm 25:19). Cruelty is a sign of an unrighteous and unregenerate heart. “Deliver me, O my God, out of the hand of the wicked, out of the hand of the unrighteous and cruel man” (Psalm 71:4).<sup>2</sup> Cruelty and torture are distinctives of unbelievers. “Then she [Delilah] lulled him [Samson] to sleep on her knees, and called for a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. Then she began to torment him, and his strength left him” (Judges 16:19). Yes, Delilah tortured Samson. Is Delilah a good example for Christians to follow?

Where in the Bible do we find examples of Jesus, the Prophets, or the Apostles being cruel? Evil men were cruel to them but consider what the Apostle Peter stated about the proper manifestation of Christian character in response: Remember Jesus “who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1 Peter

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<sup>2</sup> God complained about His covenant people being cruel: “Even the jackals present their breasts to nurse their young; but the daughter of my people is cruel, like ostriches in the wilderness” (Lamentations 4:3). In other words, they were wayward. Since when is cruelty part of the fruit of the Spirit?

2:23). And “having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed” (1 Peter 3:16). Accordingly, Christians should be *marked as merciful*. “The merciful man does good for his own soul, but he who is cruel troubles his own flesh” (Proverbs 11:27). Men marked by cruelty are hated by men and they are often abhorred by God. But a Christian’s character should be marked by “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness”, as well as by “righteousness and truth” (Galatians 5:22; Ephesians 5:9). Cruelty simply does not fit in the list.

Therefore, Christians should not be characteristically cruel. Cruelty is opposed to their new nature. “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18). Following the apostolic logic, perfect love (coming from God) casts out fear (being separated from God) which necessitates torment (in this life and later in hell). Think of some cruel men: Nero, the many Papal Inquisitors, Attila the Hun, General William T. Sherman, Stalin, Mao Tse-Tung, Pol Pot, and Robert Mugabe. Were they Christians? Was God’s way shown through their actions? No, they exemplified the opposite. Cruelty and torment are reserved for hell when God concludes “this present evil age” (Galatians 1:4). Until then, Christians should loathe to advocate bringing any aspect of hell to earth—including torture.

Christians should defend themselves but they should not be brutal, pitiless, or malicious. If they advocate capital punishment then they should also advocate that it be carried out in a genial manner. They should not enshrine torture as good and reasonable conduct—whether in America, or as practiced by U.S. forces in Guantanamo Bay, or by the out-sourcing of torture of enemy combatants and alleged terrorists in Uzbekistan. American public policy at home or abroad should not mimic that of Stalin or Pol Pot. The cruel and brutal scourge of General Sherman must be shunned. Moreover, Christians should not monger over war. War is a horrible thing, even when necessary and just. It is neither to be desired nor glorified. And neither should torture and cruelty be part of a Christian’s personal course of action or any public policy which he backs.