



## “The Death Penalty” Social Statement Summary

The text of the social statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) titled “The Death Penalty,” adopted in 1991, begins by considering how violence affects us. Recognizing the distrust, harm, anger, sorrow and injustice that follow violence, the statement acknowledges that violence makes us want to seek revenge and yearn after simple solutions. The death penalty is by nature a controversial issue: “While we all look to the Word of God and bring our reason to the death penalty issue, we can and do assess it with some diversity” (p. 2).

We begin by assuming that government plays a God-given, protective role. “God entrusts the state with power to take human life when failure to do so constitutes a clear danger to society” (p. 2). This view is qualified, though: “[T]his does not mean that governments have an unlimited right to take life” or “must punish crime by death” (p. 2). The text quickly questions whether it is even possible to administer the death penalty justly. By the end, the social statement concludes that it is not.

Citing Scripture, the statement supports the Christian calling to “respond to violent crime in the restorative way taught by Jesus and shown by his actions” (p. 2). Restorative justice involves “addressing the hurt of each person whose life has been touched by violent crime” (p.3). Such an approach “makes the community safer for all” (p. 3).

Three reasons are given to oppose capital punishment:

- 1) executions represent an unacceptable, non-restorative approach to violent crime;
- 2) executions can reinforce social injustice; and
- 3) the death penalty cannot possibly be administered justly.

Non-restorative, excessive focus on the violent offender, coupled with consistent lack of interest in victim well-being, characterize executions. Executions also deny the opportunity for offender “conversion and restoration” (p. 3).

The second reason can be explained this way: Violent crime reminds us that we have failed to ensure justice for all members of society, yet people often respond to violent crime as though it were exclusively the criminal’s individual failure. Capital punishment makes no provable impact on the breeding grounds of violent crime. Instead, executions harm society by mirroring and reinforcing existing injustice. Ultimately, the death penalty distracts us from our work toward a just society.

Finally, it is impossible to administer capital punishment justly. “The race of the victim plays a role in who is sentenced to death and who is sentenced to life imprisonment, as do gender, race, mental capacity, age and affluence of the accused” (p. 4). The justice system is not perfect, and yet an execution cannot be undone if a verdict is overturned.

The social statement sums up its opposition: “The practice of the death penalty undermines any possible moral message we might want to ‘send.’ It is not fair and fails to make society better or safer. The message conveyed by an execution, reflected in the attention it receives from the public, is one of brutality and violence” (p. 4).