

# **Violent retribution should be unthinkable to Christians, pastor maintains\_51704**

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## **Violent retribution should be unthinkable to Christians, pastor maintains**

**By Ferrell Foster**

*Texas Baptist Communications*

SAN ANTONIO—God made peace with mankind through Jesus' “nonviolent self-sacrifice rather than violent retribution,” and that is how Christians should make peace with others, said Dallas pastor George Mason in stating his opposition to capital punishment.

Mason, pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church, spoke to the Texas Baptist Christian Life Conference, sponsored by the Baptist General Convention of Texas Christian Life Commission.

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George  
Mason,  
pastor of  
Wilshire  
Baptist  
Church in  
Dallas,  
discusses  
his ideas on  
ethical  
issues with  
participants  
at the  
Texas  
Baptist  
Christian  
Life  
Conference  
in San  
Antonio.

Christian belief and practice should “shape us into the kind of people that would make penalizing people with death sentences so inimical to the gospel that we could never find ourselves advocating for capital punishment in public life,” Mason said.

Capital punishment is an outward expression of a dominant culture's need for order and stability, he said. But Christ and his church are built on forgiveness and transformation.

“Forgiveness is the new law of the church that bears witness to the coming kingdom of God and provides at the same time all the stability we need” to

attest to God's goodness, he said.

Forgiveness in Jesus Christ is the “ground of our relations with one another, the starting point for our enactment of justice and the imaginative source for our vision of human transformation.”

Conservative and liberal churches are guilty of two different errors, Mason said. Conservatives can become “preoccupied with social power and the need to see society hold people accountable for their sins.” Liberals can neglect to recognize that sinners need to be transformed into the image of Christ by “adopting the practices of the gospel” that would lead toward participation in the “new creation.”

Scripture offers a third way, a gospel way, rooted in the forgiveness of God through Christ and the transformation of people. Two Christian practices, baptism and the Lord's Supper, reflect that gospel way, he said.

Mason reminded participants Jesus was an unjust victim of capital punishment and that the early church suffered from it, as well. When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine, Christian views toward capital punishment changed.

“After gaining power and protection from the state, the church came to read the Bible differently,” Mason said. “Suddenly, Old Testament texts that authorized capital punishment for a diverse number of crimes seemed to provide rationale for such support.”

When the church turned to the state, rather the gospel, in developing its views of justice, its focus changed in interpreting Scripture, he said. “Now the church came to be the chief authorizer of concern for order and stability.”

Such an approach “closes off the transformative dimension of the new creation that Christ inaugurated,” Mason said. “The church's identification

with the victim and concern for justice among the most vulnerable” lost its power because “now the church itself was not the most vulnerable.”

“Jesus' words about neighborliness and concern for the marginalized and the stranger were obscured by the need to justify the privileged place of the church in the society.”

A similar condition is evident today in the United States, Mason said.

“The church is failing to provide sufficient evidence that there is a third way to deal with injuries against each other,” he said. “The lack of attention given to disciplines of grace that must be practiced in our relationships impoverishes our witness to anyone outside the church. ...

“God holds us accountable for what we do with our forgiveness.”

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