

EDITORIAL: Torture, life & moral consistency

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What do you think about torture?

For most of our lives, that has seemed like a theoretical question. Torture was the stuff of spy thrillers. So, your answer could have been based more on your antipathy for the villain in the latest James Bond movie or Robert Ludlum novel than on principled ethical decision-making.

Unfortunately, torture no longer is the stuff of fiction. Nor, sadly, can we pass it off as the exclusive domain of despots and dictators. Now, we are familiar with the places, legal theories and techniques that force us to acknowledge our beloved country has implemented torture for its own purposes. We know about Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. We have read and heard about government legal briefs that justified torture. Most of us could describe how waterboarding works.

Editor Marv Knox

We cannot deny torture. We must confront its reality. We must come to grips with how we feel about it.

Recently, I have been disappointed to learn the demographic group in which I reside—white evangelical Protestant Christians—is the segment of the U.S. population that most enthusiastically embraces torture.

A [new survey by the Pew Research Center](#) reveals 62 percent of white evangelicals believe the use of torture against suspected terrorists can often (18 percent) or sometimes (44 percent) be justified. This compares to 49 percent of the total U.S. population who believe torture can often (15 percent) or sometimes (34 percent) be justified.

I know many of you—in fact, apparently, most of you—disagree with me. ([On this issue](#), I take ironic comfort in joining company with an ultra-conservative ethicist with whom I often disagree, Richard Land, and a moderate/progressive ethicist with whom I usually agree, David Gushee.) But it's embarrassing to realize the population at-large is more likely than evangelical Christians to take what I believe to be a Christlike position regarding torture. No matter how I analyze the situations and possible outcomes, I cannot picture Jesus torturing someone—for any purpose.

Of course, torture is exceedingly complicated. Although we don't have the space to do it here, we must differentiate between "enhanced interrogation techniques" and torture. Some physically and psychologically demanding practices do not cross the line into torture. But most reasonable people agree waterboarding is torture. And my own tribe of Christians leads the way in embracing it. This is disturbing.

Some people defend torture because they believe torturing a small number of foreigners can be justified to save the lives of a larger number of Americans. This argument should be dismissed on two counts. First, it's based on a questionable assumption. Considerable evidence suggests torture is less effective than many other interrogation methods. More significantly, however, this is a utilitarian approach to ethics. At root, it means the ends justifies the means. Americans, not to mention Bible-believing Christians, historically have taken pride in being better than that. We must avoid such flimsy ethics, even when we approach something as scary as terrorism.

Ironically, many Christians who practice utilitarian ethics to justify terrorism excoriate others who argue the ends justify the means to support embryonic stem cell research.

This brings us to a broader point: Christians must lead the way in developing a consistent ethic that supports life. Christians who oppose

abortion but then endorse torture and support capital punishment (particularly in the face of mounting evidence of wrongful convictions) are not consistently pro-life. Catholics come the closest to being consistent, but evangelicals are far from it.

These are difficult issues. Consensus is challenging. Still, for the sake of righteousness and the gospel, we must be consistent.

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