

Wonder

Volume: 1 Number: 2 Theme: **Capital Punishment**

Title: **“My Civic Duty”** Author: **Andrew Boyd**

I was home in early October and sifting through the pile of mail in my room when I first saw it. There was no mistaking the envelop, white with blue letters in the upper left hand corner that spelled out “Jury Administration.” My heart sank. I opened it and accepted the inevitable inconvenience of Jury Duty. It’s not that I am opposed to doing my civic duty; in fact in other circumstances I’d be excited to do it. The problem was that I attend school in New York, and I had to go back to Connecticut for the day to fulfill my obligation.

Early on a cold January morning, I arrived at the monolithic courthouse in New Haven, Connecticut. I was surprised to see several local news crews outside the building. Entering the cold, institutional building, I breathed a deep sigh and prepared myself for a long day of boredom. Sitting down in an uncomfortable chair, our group of potential jurors was indoctrinated into the world of Justice via a short video and a speech from a bureaucrat. Then we were told to wait.

While we all sat around waiting to be called, we of course commenced in socially appropriate small-talk. I asked the group around the coffee pot about the news vans outside. They all looked at me with confusion and amazement.

“Where have you been?” one man asked.

“Oh, I go to school out of state.”

“They’re selecting jurors for the Petit Case today.”

Then it all hit me. Of course, how could I forget the Petit Case? On the morning of July 23, 2007 police arrived at a house in Cheshire, a rather normal Connecticut town, to find two men fleeing from a house engulfed in flames. Inside the house, officers found Dr. William Petit, who had been beaten, and the bodies of his wife, and his two daughters, age seventeen and eleven. I will spare you the more gruesome details of the case, which a quick Google search can reveal to you. The two men, who were convicted felons, were immediately captured by police.

Jury selection for this case had proven extremely problematic. Apart from finding someone who actually has the time for a drawn out criminal trial, finding an unbiased juror was proving to be almost impossible. The case had been over the local and national news for years. In addition, the police had caught the suspects at the scene of the crime. At the time that I was called for jury duty the court had gone through eighty potential jurors and had found only one acceptable. Several of the potential jurors in the room with me were from Cheshire, and knew the family.

In Connecticut, we still have capital punishment. In capital cases, Connecticut juries vote on whether to apply the death penalty after they find the defendant guilty. Our governor cannot commute the sentence or grant a pardon. Although there are currently ten inmates on death row,

there has only been one execution in the state since 1960. Prosecutors are seeking the death penalty in this case.

I started polling people around me, asking them if they would sentence one of these men to death. Everyone I asked said, with stern certainty that they would vote to execute. I was stunned. Some other potential jurors offered even more colorful responses, such as “I’d kill them both with my bare hands for what they did to that family.” Maybe I’m just a naïve kid from the Connecticut suburbs, but the “eye for an eye” attitude prevalent in the room surprised and disturbed me. I asked why the men hadn’t simply taken a plea bargain, since they were caught at the scene of the crime.

“Because they have a better chance of living if they get convicted and sent to death row,” one of my potential-juror friends responded.

“I don’t understand.”

“If they plead guilty and go to prison, one of the inmates will kill them within months for what they did to those girls, but if they get sent to death row by a jury, they can languish there unharmed and wait for their appeals process to play out, or for the state to do away with capital punishment.” It had never occurred to me that for some crimes, being sent to prison is a death sentence.

Ultimately, we were all dismissed early from the jury room as the court was not going to be selecting any jurors that day. I am sure I would have been dismissed anyway because I never would have been able to vote on whether a person should live or die. There was so much gray area in this situation; it was overwhelming to me, especially the idea that sentencing these two men to death could actually save their lives. How do we respond to irrational violence? I would argue that the only rational response to anything is love, but how that’s acted out in these situations seems open to much debate. In the end, what I came away with was that the decision to end a life, to take away the opportunity for someone’s salvation, should not be left up to a small panel of your peers.

Andrew Boyd is the Managing Editor of this blog. He is a graduate of the University of Connecticut School of Business and a Student at St. Vladimir’s Seminary in Yonkers, NY.

Discussion Questions:

What is the Christian response to irrational violence?

What would your response be if you were called to be a juror in this case? Could you be a party to sentencing someone to death?

Is the author just a naïve kid as he implies, or are we Christians called to a higher moral standard than “eye for an eye” justice?