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Faith and the Death Penalty: Attitudes of Students at Christian Colleges on Religious Belief and Capital Punishment in the United States

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Faith and the Death Penalty: Attitudes of Students at Christian Colleges on Religious
Belief and Capital Punishment in the United States

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the distinction

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Abstract

American Christians are not in complete agreement on the legality and morality of capital punishment. Recent surveys show that between 61 and 66 percent of the general population of Christians are in support of the death penalty (Barna, 2017; Jones, 2016). Christians use scripture and religious traditions as the basis for many arguments both in support and opposition of the death penalty. Official positions on capital punishment also vary across denomination. These arguments and statistics are presented in a literature review. Existing surveys have also found that support for the death penalty is lower among younger people and the college-educated (Oliphant, 2018; Barna, 2017). Considering the fact that most Christians agree with capital punishment, but most younger people and college-educated people do not, this study asks where people belonging to all three of these groups stand on the issue. Undergraduate students at two Christian universities answered survey questions concerning their religious beliefs and position on the death penalty. The survey revealed that students attending Christian colleges are much less likely to support the death penalty than Christians of the general population. Additionally, most students noted they were unsure of the Bible's position on capital punishment, but more students viewed it as unsupportive of the matter than as supportive. Finally, students claimed a variety of factors beyond Christian denomination influenced their position on capital punishment, including their education.

Faith and the Death Penalty: Attitudes of Students at Christian Colleges on Religious
Belief and Capital Punishment in the United States

Countless articles have been published on the morality of the death penalty and the views of different groups and individuals on the subject. The legality of the death penalty, also known as capital punishment, remains controversial in the United States. Ethical, political, religious, and even economic arguments have been used by scholars in both support of and in opposition to the practice of capital punishment. One significant group of people who cannot find a consensus among themselves on the issue is Christians. Especially in the United States, Christians are split on the morality and legality of the death penalty debate.

Studying Christian views on capital punishment overlaps the fields of law and religion. Many Christian groups, or denominations, have taken a position on capital punishment, some even to later reverse or retract that position. There is no unanimous position among Christians collectively, as different groups and denominations hold opinions both for and against the death penalty rooted in interpretations and applications of the Bible. Positions on the death penalty have much to do with views ranging from personal experiences and moral convictions to political and partisan views and economic considerations. Legal, ethical, and political studies have been widely conducted on this topic, but this study will place more focus on Christian views, arguments, and beliefs.

The morality of capital punishment is such a universally “hot topic” that many religious and non-religious people alike will be interested in the study. Many people are concerned with crime and its impacts, as well as the politics surrounding use of the death penalty. Pew, Gallup, and other recognized research groups have conducted surveys on

capital punishment, including surveys studying members of different Christian denominations and different political parties. However, there is not much publicized research as specific as this paper's presented research survey. This paper will consider the existing research and compare it to views of a particular subset of the Christian population: college students attending Christian universities. This question is interesting to persons connected with Christian universities, as well as to political scientists, social scientists who study the impacts of religion on group and individual decisions, and biblical scholars and theologians. This paper aims to answer how the Christian college student opinion compares with Christians of the general public. Further, the study considers the impact of Christian denominational affiliation on one's opinion on the death penalty. As the majority of the American population identifies as Christian, this study is also of interest to the layperson.

Literature Review

In most research and for this study the term *capital punishment* is defined as a sentence to death administered by the judicial system to an offender who has been convicted of a heinous crime or crimes (Gaie, 1996). In the U.S., capital punishment is allowable in 30 states for certain atrocious murders; qualifications vary by state. Of the 30 states where the death penalty is legal, 11 have not carried out capital punishment in over 10 years. The federal government has not administered the death penalty since the year 2003, although there are currently more than 60 people on death row for federal capital offenses (Gramlich, 2019). At the federal level, capital punishment can also be the sentence for certain crimes of treason, espionage, and terrorism, in addition to qualifying murders. The number of executions carried out per year is on the decline and has been

since 1999, when 98 people were executed. In recent years, the number of executions has been in the 20s, with 23 carried out in 2017 (Masci, 2018).

In this study, *Christian denominational affiliation* refers to the specific religious group or sects of Christianity that a person identifies with or belongs to. These different groups or sects each traditionally have their own traditions, doctrines, and interpretations of Biblical scripture. Many hold official positions on capital punishment.

Christians both for and against capital punishment cite the Old Testament narratives and laws on death penalty for certain crimes. Proponents for the death penalty commonly use the idea of justice, citing the retributive concept of “an eye for an eye,” and God’s orders to kill masses for their wrongdoing. Opponents of the death penalty cite instances where mercy is offered to sinners, such as God’s protection of Cain’s life after he murdered Abel. Opponents of the death penalty also cite the New Testament teachings of forgiveness and redemption for all sinners, while proponents of the death penalty cite New Testament quotes of Jesus’ and Paul’s acceptance of capital punishment. Opponents may also say man should not “play God,” with a reminder that vengeance belongs to God while arguing for the sanctity of human life. Supporters of capital punishment are more likely to cite the Bible’s advocacy for justice and claim God condones death for serious offenses and for the protection of humanity.

Arguments in Support

The media grants much attention to capital murder cases, purposely playing on collective public emotions of sympathy for the victim and anger and vengeance against the killer. The majority of Americans support the use of capital punishment by a small margin. Although this support is generally on the decline, a Pew Research Center survey

in 2018 showed a small but surprising uptick in support from 49 percent in 2016 to 54 percent in 2018 (Masci, 2018). Arguments in support of the morality and legality of capital punishment are presented below.

According to former federal district court judge and state's attorney Alexander Williams Jr. (1992), the basis of all arguments in support of capital punishment is the belief that the government has the right to punish criminals. Further, in the interest of upholding the common good, execution of violent criminals to both punish offenders and deter future crime is allowable. The concepts of retribution and deterrence are used as valid and popular punishment theories among death penalty supporters (Williams, 1992; Charles, 1995). Additionally, supporters appealing to the interests of public safety assert that the only way to absolutely prevent a murderer from killing again is to execute him. It is a common view that a person who would commit such a heinous crime as to warrant the death penalty would not be truly remorseful or think about the effect of their actions on the victim's family (Williams, 1992). Many death-row inmates are often believed to possess psychopathic or sociopathic tendencies and do not experience emotions normally.

While some argue against the death penalty using the sanctity of life approach, proponents of the death penalty bring up a fair point that the murderer's life should not be valued when he chose to take his victim's life (Williams, 1992). Pro-death penalty Christians also point to scripture for support of their position. As part of a moral society, Christians should uphold certain standards of behavior and hold people accountable who do not meet these standards (Charles, 1995). Another supporting argument for the necessity of capital punishment is "substitutionary atonement"—taking a life to repay a life. This was the reason God offered his only Son as a sacrifice and in so doing showed

mercy on humanity. In this way, the death penalty makes human life even more valuable in that an unjust loss of life warrants a severe punishment (Geisler, 1989).

People who oppose capital punishment use the New Testament teachings on forgiveness to argue against practice of retributive punishment like the death penalty. To answer, supporters of the death penalty challenge this argument, declaring that practicing the forgiveness concept in punitive contexts is like giving people a license to commit crime without repercussions (Gaie, 1996).

Arguments in Opposition

Just as Christians use the Bible to argue for capital punishment, biblical arguments can also be made to argue against capital punishment. According to academic writer and Notre Dame fellow David Bentley Hart (2017), many Christians who try using scripture in support of capital punishment make the mistake of misinterpreting Romans 13:1-7 and other scriptures as stating capital punishment conducted by a government is permissible and sanctioned by God. This is a significant scripture for many death penalty supporters (Hart, 2017); in fact, the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia (2002) famously used this religious argument to defend the death penalty in that God gives government divine authority. Again, a lot of scripture is open to interpretation, and while some use Romans 13 as strong support for the death penalty, others say this interpretation of the passage is incorrect. Hart (2017) claims that Romans 13 does not concern the death penalty or Christians in positions of power, but that the original Greek was lost in translation and has often been instead interpreted in a dramatic sense. Hart criticizes those who find biblical justification for the death penalty by “picking and choosing” only select

verses from the scriptures to fit an agenda, rather than reading scripture as a whole and considering the context.

For those who are anti-death penalty, the ability to give and take life belongs only to God. The state cannot claim to be the direct enforcer of God's will (Gaie, 1996), because man does not always know God's will. In simpler terms, society has no right to "play God" and take a life. Supporters also attempt to appeal to a passion for vengeance, often citing examples of particularly heinous crimes whose perpetrators do not deserve our mercy and victims who deserve "justice". Hart (2017) argues instead that showing mercy for these criminals is actually our Christian calling to embody the virtue of charity, "the chief of all Christian virtues" (p. 16).

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus defies conventional and literal practices and rules of the Old Law, the rules and covenant presented at the start of the Old Testament. Another biblical reason for opposing capital punishment is the claim that Jesus Christ's famous Sermon on the Mount forbids the Old Testament retributive idea many use to justify the death penalty and the many extremes of the Old Law (Hart, 2017; Gaie, 1996). In Matthew 5, Jesus used his famous "turn the other cheek" declaration instead of upholding the Old Testament "eye for eye, and tooth for tooth" retributive concept, immediately followed by statements about loving our enemies. The Apostle Paul follows up in his writing to the Romans by stating not to repay an evil with another evil, but instead with good (Lee, 2011). Retribution goes against the Christian practice of forgiveness and loving all people. The Apostle Paul says the Old Law is flawed because it had not been fulfilled through Jesus. For this reason, New Testament teachings override the Old Law (Gaie, 1996). Further, there are countless verses in the New Testament that

require Christians to practice forgiveness and mercy above judgement (Hart, 2017). God's love triumphs over sin and Christ offers redemption and salvation, no matter the sin.

Opponents of the death penalty will also use the biblical repentance and forgiveness argument. This view states that even a person convicted of a capital crime should be given the chance to repent and be granted forgiveness. Christians are commanded to practice love and forgiveness in all areas and without limits, and enacting the death penalty shows that we have no faith in redemption or rehabilitation of the offender (Gaie, 1996). Hart asserts that to Christians, the "justness" of the death penalty does not matter. Even if the government did have the right to execute criminals, Christians should not enact it (Hart, 2017). Instead, Jesus' New Testament teachings of love and forgiveness and against vengeance and violence are what Christians should base decisions on, leading them to a position of opposition to capital punishment (Gaie, 1996; Hart, 2017).

For every statistical argument about the death penalty's deterrence ability, opponents raise equally valid statistical arguments for opposition. False convictions and courtroom error percentages are much higher than the probability of a violent murderer escaping prison (Hart, 2017), so many are concerned about innocent people being sentenced to death for a crime they did not commit (DeConto, 2013). Although it is easy to argue that executing murderers makes society safer, this does not grant Christians permission to go through with it (Hart, 2017).

In summation, scripture and biblical arguments are used by Christians on both sides of the death penalty debate. There are many different passages used to support

positions for proponents and opponents alike. How can scripture be saying two different things? It may seem that scripture is inconsistent in its instruction on the morality of capital punishment. Biblical interpretation and Christian tradition come into play here.

Positions of Christian Denominations

Different Christian traditions and denominational groups have their own positions on how scripture should be interpreted. Many denominations have spoken official positions on the death penalty stemming from the above arguments and the group's analysis of scripture and its implications for modern times. Some denominations have taken an official stance, only to later reverse or retract the stance, such as in the case of the National Association of Evangelicals.

Until 2018, Catholic doctrine did not completely disallow capital punishment, but stated that it is only allowable in the theoretical last-resort situation when it would be the only way to keep a murderer from continuing his crimes (Lamb, 2017; Hart, 2017). Pope Francis has very publicly voiced his anti-death penalty stance, even though close to half of all Catholics in the U.S. say they support the death penalty (Lamb, 2017; Masci, 2018). Official Catholic teaching now does not support capital punishment at all (Masci, 2018).

A particularly large group of Christians are biblical literalists who place high importance on evangelism (Rade, Holland, Gregory, & Desmarais, 2017). These "Fundamentalist Christians" are commonly tagged as pro-capital punishment due to their stereotype of being strict and unsympathetic (Lytle & Bensel, 2016). In fact, in a study at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, self-identified Fundamentalists were found to be more likely to endorse the use of capital punishment, while their more progressive Christian counterparts who advocated for religious tolerance were much more likely to be

in opposition (Lytle & Bensel, 2016). There are also smaller and perhaps lesser known denominations that prohibit violence of any kind, such as Mennonites and Quakers (Gunn, 2017).

Figure 1 shown below lists official positions of several denominations on the death penalty as of 2015. Note that Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam are not Christian denominations.

Where Religious Groups Stand on the Death Penalty

Oppose	No official position	Favor
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American Baptist Churches USA • Buddhism • Catholic Church¹ • Episcopal Church • Evangelical Lutheran Church in America • Judaism² • Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) • Unitarian Universalist Association • United Methodist Church • United Church of Christ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assemblies of God • Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) • Hinduism • National Baptist Convention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islam³ • Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod • Southern Baptist Convention
<p>¹ Catechism of Catholic Church allows for possibility of death penalty, but Pope Francis and U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops oppose.</p> <p>² The Reform and Conservative Jewish movements are opposed to the death penalty; the Orthodox Union has called for a moratorium.</p>	<p>³ While many Islamic courts around the world use the death penalty, some American Muslim groups oppose it. For example, the Council on American-Islamic Relations has called for a moratorium.</p>	
PEW RESEARCH CENTER		As of July 2015

Figure 1. Denominations on the death penalty. Lipka, M. (2015). Some major U.S. religious groups differ from their members on the death penalty. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/13/some-major-u-s-religious-groups-differ-from-their-members-on-the-death-penalty/>

A research team at North Carolina State University examined Christian views on capital punishment in relation to their temperament towards God. Protestants who viewed God as harsh and judgmental were more likely to be in favor of the death penalty. Conversely, Christians who had a more positive view of God's nature as being compassionate and gracious were more likely to oppose capital punishment (Rade et al., 2017). This finding is consistent with the views of God presented in Wayne House and John Yoder's written debate over capital punishment. As a supporter of the death penalty, House has a harsh Christian perception underlining rules and retributive justice; however his opponent, Yoder, believes in a loving, understanding, and forgiving God (Westmoreland-White, 1992). The North Carolina researchers also suggest that biblical interpretation and beliefs are better predictors of capital punishment opinion than denominational affiliation (Rade et al., 2017). This proposition is consistent with my study's findings. Although many denominations do have official positions on capital punishment, many members or followers of these denominations do not seem to agree with their leadership or doctrine's official position. There is obvious discrepancy; the number of Christians who support the death penalty does not align with the statistical majority of official denominational stances against the death penalty (Lipka, 2015). Yet another study at American University found that rather than denominational affiliation playing a major role in capital punishment position, simply the fact of belonging to any Christian tradition made a person more likely to support the death penalty than non-religious persons. Among denominations, the study found no conclusive data that one Christian group is always more likely to support the death penalty than the next group (Wozniak & Lewis, 2010). It would seem that apart from and regardless of

denominational affiliation, Christians hold opinions both for and against the death penalty, perhaps rooted in personal or traditional religious belief apart from one's practiced denomination. Background and political affiliation are also known to be significant factors.

Gallup polls of the American adult population updated in 2016 show that a majority of Christians believe the death penalty is morally acceptable, with Catholics at 61 percent support and Protestants at 66 percent (Jones, 2016). However, in a 2017 study by the American Culture & Faith Institute, 41 percent of Americans said they thought Jesus would oppose the death penalty, 32 percent said they did not know, and only 27 percent said Jesus would support it. George Barna (2017), director of this study, noted:

The views of born again Christians regarding the death penalty typically have a weak relationship to their faith. Specifically, nearly two-thirds of born again Christians (63%) say they support the death penalty. Yet, only two out of every ten of them say they strongly agree that the Bible supports the use of the death penalty and strongly affirm that Jesus Christ would approve of it. In fact, born again adults are more likely to admit to not knowing what the Bible teaches or Jesus would do on this matter than they are to have firm beliefs on these matters... This issue is highly partisan and ideological in nature. Overall, Democrats and liberals are consistently among the most numerous opponents of the death penalty. In contrast, Republicans and conservatives are typically among the most widespread supporters of it. (para.11)

The study also considered age as a factor. Barna (2017) continues, "Millennials consistently demonstrated the lowest levels of support for the death penalty

among any age group. People 65 or older consistently demonstrated the highest levels of support for it.” It is common knowledge that younger people are generally more progressive in their views; this is also true of college-educated individuals (Oliphant, 2018). Considering the fact that most Christians agree with capital punishment, but most younger people and college-educated people do not, this paper seeks to answer where people belonging to all of these groups lie on the question. Students at Christian universities answered survey questions pertaining to the issue, presented below.

Methodology

This research project was conducted by sending out an online survey to undergraduate students at two Christian universities in the United States. Ten questions were asked in the survey. The aim was to gather relevant demographic information, then to ask students to share their positions reasonings on matters of faith and capital punishment. A complete listing of the questions asked and the responses gathered can be found in the Appendix section of this paper.

Participants

The only requirement of the survey participants was status as an undergraduate student of either Abilene Christian University or Belmont University. Both of these universities are private Christian universities located in the United States. They were chosen as a feasible sample of the total population of U.S. Christian college students. Abilene Christian University is located in the conservative geographic area of Abilene, Texas, while Belmont University is located in the more progressive region of Nashville, Tennessee. The schools were also chosen out of convenience, as the researcher had

contacts at both schools to help distribute the survey. According to their respective websites, in 2018, the undergraduate student population at Belmont was 6,666 students, while Abilene Christian's was 3,760 students. In addition to a larger student population, Belmont University also yielded a better response rate. The tables below show the relevant demographic breakdown of the 140 survey respondents. A majority of the student participants attended Belmont University and were non-freshman between the ages of 20 and 22 years old. One student skipped identifying the university he or she attended.

Table 1		
<i>Question 1: Please select the university you attend.</i>		
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Abilene Christian University	26.62%	37
Belmont University	73.38%	102
		Answered: 139
		Skipped: 1

Table 2		
<i>Question 2. What is your classification?</i>		
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Freshman	2.14%	3
Sophomore	28.57%	40
Junior	37.86%	53
Senior	31.43%	44
Other	0%	0
		Answered: 140
		Skipped: 0

Table 3		
<i>Question 3. How old are you?</i>		
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
18-19	12.86%	18
20-22	85.71%	120
23+	1.43%	2
		Answered: 140
		Skipped: 0

Procedures

The survey was dispersed via student email and social media. Both Abilene Christian's and Belmont's Deans of Students took part in distributing the survey. At both universities, the survey was emailed to student leaders, who were asked to participate and further share the survey. Because of a lower rate of responses from Abilene Christian University students, the survey was also shared on social media by the researcher with a caption targeting Abilene Christian University students.

Limitations

This study was limited by both time and resources. Low rates of participation were expected because no compensation or incentive was offered to participants to complete the survey. Although a wide range of opinion was captured by the survey, the sample was relatively small in 140 respondents. Due to limitations in participant selection and response rate, the survey findings not be representative of the entire population of Christian college students in the United States. Nevertheless, this data encourages further study on the issue of capital punishment as viewed by the whole U.S. Christian college student population.

Ethics

The survey contained three “pages” through which the participant navigated. Page one contained a statement of the purpose of the research survey which read: “This survey is conducted by an undergraduate student at Abilene Christian University in attempt to gather data for an Honors Project Thesis. This survey aims to collect and analyze attitudes about the death penalty in the United States from the perspective of students attending Christian colleges.” Additionally, a statement of confidentiality read: “Your answers will be kept confidential. No information that would identify you as a survey participant will be released.” Further, the participant was informed that skipping an uncomfortable question was allowable and there would be no penalty for choosing not to complete the survey. The researcher’s email address was also listed as a form of contact. Participants were asked to proceed only if they fully understood and consented to participate. This informed consent text read:

Please read the following carefully. I understand that: Only students age 18 or older may participate. I am participating in a survey as part of data collection for an undergraduate student's Honors Thesis Project. The survey will take about 5 minutes of my time. Survey participants are confidential and information will not be shared in a way that will identify me. Only the researcher and Thesis committee mentors (Abilene Christian University faculty members) have access to the information I provide in this survey. My responses presented in the Honors Project Thesis will remain anonymous. Risks associated with this survey are minimal. I will not be penalized for choosing not to complete the survey. By

clicking 'Next' you indicate you understand and agree to the above information and consent to participate in the survey.

Page two was used to define the term "death penalty" and offer some general information for the participant to read before answering survey questions:

This survey is collecting opinions on a hot topic: the death penalty (also known as capital punishment). The death penalty is a sentence to death, handed down by a court of law as punishment for a crime. In the United States, only certain crimes qualify an offender to be sentenced to death. These crimes mostly include various kinds of murder, such as murder for hire, murder of an elected official, murder of a child, murder during the commission of another felony, etc. Currently, the federal government and 30 states allow the death penalty. This study also considers the role Biblical interpretation and denominational affiliation play in your views.

Page three contained ten questions, most of which were multiple choice. To gather general demographic information, the first three questions asked university attended, classification (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior), and age range. The next seven questions addressed denominational affiliation and views on the death penalty.

The online survey creator "SurveyMonkey" was used to create the survey and collect and analyze responses. The data collected from participants was stored on the SurveyMonkey platform on the researcher's password-protected account. Since a URL was required to access the survey, no email sign-in was required. Therefore, there was no identifiable information collected and participants remained anonymous.

Results

The survey questions were short and direct and asked respondents to select one answer from a list of multiple answer options. Participants were asked outright if they supported the death penalty. A surprising 63.57 percent did not support the use of the death penalty. Exactly 20 percent was in support, and 16.43 percent said they neither agreed nor disagreed.

Table 4		
<i>Question 4: Agree or Disagree: I support the use of the death penalty.</i>		
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Agree	20%	28
Disagree	63.57%	89
Neither agree nor disagree	16.43%	23
		Answered: 140
		Skipped: 0

Next, participants were asked what Christian denomination they belonged to. Exactly 50 percent of the respondents said they were non-denominational. This was by far the largest group represented. The next largest group at 12.14 percent was Baptists, followed by 9.29 percent Catholics and 8.57 percent Church of Christ. Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Mormons, and other unlisted denominations each were represented by five percent or less of the participants. Five respondents (3.57 percent) said they were not Christians.

Table 5		
<i>Question 5: What is your Christian denominational affiliation?</i>		
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Not Christian	3.57%	5
Baptist	12.14%	17
Catholic	9.29%	13
Episcopal	1.43%	2
Lutheran	2.14%	3
Presbyterian	5.00%	7
Methodist	2.14%	3
Church of Christ	8.57%	12
Assembly of God	0.00%	0
LDS (Mormon)	1.43%	2
Non-denominational	50.00%	70
Other (please specify)	4.29%	6
1. Pentecostal		
2. Church of God		
3. Mennonite		
4. Anglican		
5. Somewhere between Episcopal and being unaffiliated		
6. Half Presbyterian, Half Baptist (grew up in one, currently in other, mixed views)		
		Answered: 140
		Skipped: 0

Although several denominations have official positions on the death penalty as presented in the review of existing research studies, the majority of survey respondents—66.43 percent—said they were unaware of their denomination’s official position. Results showed 17.86 percent said their denomination did not have an official position, 12.14 percent agreed with their denomination’s official position, while 3.57 percent disagreed. Respondents were also asked if their church leaders (pastors, preachers, clergy, etc.) spoke out about the death penalty. Most of the respondents (69.29 percent) said no, their pastors did not speak out on the issue. Only 12.14 percent said their pastors spoke on the issue with 3.57 percent speaking in support and 8.57 percent speaking in opposition.

Next, participants were asked if the Bible supported the use of the death penalty. Answer choices were given in the form of a likert scale, with responses ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” Unsurprisingly, the middle option of “neither agree nor disagree” was the most often selected at around 25 percent. Just over 50 percent of the responses were some level of disagreement: just over 20 percent said they somewhat disagree, 20 percent said they disagree, and 11.43 percent said they strongly disagree. The remaining almost 25 percent of responses were some level of agreement with the statement that the Bible supports the use of the death penalty.

Because partisan politics or a political background can play a role in forming opinions, students were also asked of which political party they identified most. There were almost equal numbers of Republicans (36 percent) and Democrats (almost 33 percent). The next largest group was Independents at 15.71 percent of respondents. Just over 11 percent said they did not identify politically. Of the remaining 3.5 percent, three students said they were moderate, one was a Libertarian, and one was a Democratic Socialist.

The last question asked respondents which factors had the biggest influence on their opinion on the death penalty. Obviously, this question is self-evaluative and was meant to explore how students believe their opinion was formed. Instead of being limited to one response option on this question, students were able to select up to three influences from the response choices. The most selected factor of influence was education at 104 selections, followed by religious belief at 88 selections, then media at 75 selections. Personal experience and views of family and friends received 25 and 54 responses, respectively. Students were also able to type a specific response into a text box. Most of

these open-ended responses fell into the category of either personal morals and values, or research on the topic.

Table 10		
<i>Question 10: Which of the following has had the biggest influence on your opinion on the issue of the death penalty? (please select the top 3 influences)</i>		
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
The views of my friends and family	38.57%	54
What I have seen and/or read in the media	53.57%	75
My religious beliefs	62.86%	88
My education	74.29%	104
A personal experience	17.29%	25
Something else (please specify)	10.71%	15
		Answered: 140
		Skipped: 0

Discussion

Much research has been done studying public perception of the death penalty, as well as the more specific group of the Christian population. However, little research exists on a particular subset of this larger Christian group. This study aims to analyze how the Christian college student opinion compares with Christians of the general public. Further, the study considers effects of denominational affiliation on student opinion on the death penalty.

While somewhere between 61 and 66 percent of the general population of Christians are in support of the death penalty (Barna, 2017; Jones, 2016), a drastically smaller 20 percent proportion of Christian college students sampled support the death penalty. The majority of college students, 63.57 percent, did not support capital punishment. Foreseeing the possibility for a discrepancy like this, the researcher included

the remaining survey questions to evaluate the factors that might account for this disagreement.

The largest Christian group represented by the students was non-denominational Christians. A 2016 Gallup survey showed a dip in the number of Americans claiming a formal denomination and an increased number identifying as non-denominational. This may be partly due to “a tendency for church leaders to downplay their denominational affiliation in their own local branding” (Newport, 2017, para. 8). The idea of having no adherence to a formal group and to identify simply as Christian is appealing to many, including college students. Students also may have grown up in a certain denomination, only to arrive at college and begin exploring others. Others may simply be indecisive or non-conformists.

Of these non-denominational students, over 70 percent did not support the death penalty. As for Baptist students, 41 percent disagreed with the death penalty and 35 percent agreed. In the general population, Baptists are also split on the issue, depending on their tradition. Southern Baptists officially support the death penalty, while American Baptists oppose (Lipka, 2015). Despite Pope Francis’ public opposition of capital punishment and the church’s adoption of his position, about half of the general Catholic population—53 percent—still supports the death penalty (Lipka, 2015). Of the Catholic students surveyed, almost 70 percent disagreed with the death penalty, almost 8 percent agreed, and the remainder neither agreed nor disagreed. The survey’s findings show that denominational stance does not always determine a student’s position. In fact, many students (66.43 percent) did not know of their denomination’s official stance on capital punishment.

While 74 percent of general public Republicans support the death penalty (Barna, 2017), only 31.37 percent of the sample of Republican students supported the death penalty. The majority, 56.86 percent, did not support it, leaving 11.76 percent unsure. Of the Democrats surveyed, 76 percent disagreed with the death penalty. Only just over 10 percent agreed, compared to 54 percent support in the general population of Democrats (Barna, 2017). While partisan affiliation may play a large role for some, for others it may not. There is another discrepancy shown by the college student response here; politics may be less of an influence than other factors.

Future Research

The final survey question asked students which factors played a role in their position on capital punishment. The factor that students most often claimed influenced their decision was education. Obviously, college students are being educated while at school. This raises a question of whether the education they have received has actually changed their mind on capital punishment or has simply reinforced a belief they already held before entering into college. Future studies could be conducted following the course of this question.

Religious belief and media were also strong influences on student opinion. Further study could be done on these questions as well. Using existing research and biblical arguments, interviews may be helpful in pinpointing the specific religious beliefs students hold that leads them to support or oppose the death penalty. Additionally, students might be surveyed on perceptions of capital punishment cases as reported on by the media.

In conclusion, the survey data revealed that students attending Christian colleges are much less likely to support the death penalty than Christians of the general population, who are older on average. The vast majority of the students surveyed do not support the use of the death penalty. They are also less likely to strictly follow their political party's position on the matter. A majority of them are non-denominational, and not exclusively set in their denomination's position if they are affiliated with a denomination. Students said their pastors are very unlikely to speak out about the issue of capital punishment. Most students were unsure of the Bible's position on capital punishment, but more students viewed it as unsupportive of the matter than as supportive. Finally, students claimed a variety of factors influenced their position on capital punishment, with the majority of responders citing education, religious beliefs, and media influencers.

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Appendix

Survey Responses (unedited)

Table 1		
<i>Question 1: Please select the university you attend.</i>		
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Abilene Christian University	26.62%	37
Belmont University	73.38%	102
		Answered: 139
		Skipped: 1

Table 2		
<i>Question 2. What is your classification?</i>		
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Freshman	2.14%	3
Sophomore	28.57%	40
Junior	37.86%	53
Senior	31.43%	44
Other	0%	0
		Answered: 140
		Skipped: 0

Table 3		
<i>Question 3. How old are you?</i>		
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
18-19	12.86%	18
20-22	85.71%	120
23+	1.43%	2
		Answered: 140
		Skipped: 0

Table 4		
<i>Question 4: Agree or Disagree: I support the use of the death penalty.</i>		
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Agree	20%	28
Disagree	63.57%	89
Neither agree nor disagree	16.43%	23
		Answered: 140
		Skipped: 0

Table 5		
<i>Question 5: What is your Christian denominational affiliation?</i>		
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Not Christian	3.57%	5
Baptist	12.14%	17
Catholic	9.29%	13
Episcopal	1.43%	2
Lutheran	2.14%	3
Presbyterian	5.00%	7
Methodist	2.14%	3
Church of Christ	8.57%	12
Assembly of God	0.00%	0
LDS (Mormon)	1.43%	2
Non-denominational	50.00%	70
Other (please specify)	4.29%	6
7. Pentecostal		
8. Church of God		
9. Mennonite		
10. Anglican		
11. Somewhere between Episcopal and being unaffiliated		
12. Half Presbyterian, Half Baptist (grew up in one, currently in other, mixed views)		
		Answered: 140
		Skipped: 0

Table 6		
<i>Question 6: Do you agree with your denomination's official position on the death penalty?</i>		
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Yes	12.14%	17
No	3.57%	5
My denomination has no official position	17.86%	25
I am unaware of my denomination's official position	66.43%	93
		Answered: 140
		Skipped: 0

Table 7		
<i>Question 7: Do the clergy/pastors at your place of worship ever speak out on the issue of the death penalty?</i>		
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Yes, in support	3.57%	5
Yes, in opposition	8.57%	12
No	69.29%	97
Don't know	18.57%	26
		Answered: 140
		Skipped: 0

Table 8		
<i>Question 8: Agree or Disagree: The Bible supports the use of the death penalty.</i>		
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Strongly agree	3.57%	5
Agree	7.86%	11
Somewhat agree	10.71%	15
Neither agree nor disagree	25.71%	36
Somewhat disagree	20.71%	29
Disagree	20.00%	28
Strongly disagree	11.43%	16
		Answered: 140
		Skipped: 0

Table 9		
<i>Question 9: What political party do you most identify with?</i>		
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Democrat	32.86%	46
Republican	36.43%	51
Independent	15.71%	22
None	11.43%	16
Other (please specify)	3.57%	5
1. Moderate- depends on the issue at hand.		
2. Libertarian		
3. Moderate		
4. Moderate		
5. Democratic Socialist		
		Answered: 140
		Skipped: 0

Table 10		
<i>Question 10: Which of the following has had the biggest influence on your opinion on the issue of the death penalty? (please select the top 3 influences)</i>		
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
The views of my friends and family	38.57%	54
What I have seen and/or read in the media	53.57%	75
My religious beliefs	62.86%	88
My education	74.29%	104
A personal experience	17.29%	25
Something else (please specify)	10.71%	15
1. I had to write a paper about the biblical church evidence for the death penalty for a theology class		
2. Basic human morality		
3. The crime charged		
4. This is different than abortion, which I know has caused lots of debate. I agree with the death penalty because the criminal has had a lifetime to commit good deeds. (Killing an unborn human is unjustified because they've never been given a chance.) I even think when a criminal is on death row, they have a chance to come to God. But some people are too dangerous to keep alive, ex. Ted bundy who escaped twice from prison and killed more people in his escape		

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Crime committed 6. Concerns about wrongful sentencing/coerced confessions especially with the role of mass incarceration and systemic racism 7. Anthony Ray Hinton’s Vanderbilt lecture, Faith and Social Justice major 8. I have watched numerous documentaries about the death penalty that have challenged me to have grace on those who are on death row. As a music therapy major, it is impossible for me to say that some people are beyond help. I just don't believe that. 9. Research 10. General moral reflection time 11. Personal morals 12. My professional values as a (future) social worker. 13. It doesn't feel right to allow an individual or collective the right to dictate the removal of life. 14. I have lost faith in the government to administer justice properly and thus I do not believe the government should have the authority to execute someone, no matter how heinous the crime. 15. Philosophical ground 		
<p>Answered: 140 Skipped: 0</p>		