READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Executing Grace

How the Death Penalty Killed Jesus and Why It's Killing Us

by Shane Claiborne

CHAPTER ONE SOMETHING JUST DOESN'T FEEL RIGHT

- 1. "Growing up," Shane Claiborne writes, "I never questioned the rightness of the death penalty" (p. 1). What's your background regarding the death penalty?
- 2. "My hope is that ... we can find a way to think about justice, and Jesus, and killing, where our heart and mind are *one*" (p. 3). What role do justice and Jesus currently play in how you understand killing? What role *should* they play?



3. Claiborne tells the stories of the execution of George Junius Stinney Jr. and the shooting by Charles Roberts at the Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania (pp. 9–13). What impression did these stories leave upon you? How might they inform the way we approach the conversation about the death penalty?

CHAPTER TWO LET'S BEGIN WITH THE VICTIMS

- 1. "When it comes to the family members of the murdered," Claiborne suggests, "some of the most amazing stories of healing and closure I have heard or read are from families who found alternatives to execution for the offender" (p. 20). What makes these stories so powerful? Why are these stories worth telling?
- 2. "There are countless cases of the silencing and repression of murder victims' families who are against execution. Some of the most disturbing cases are family members who are threatened with contempt of court if they do not seek execution" (p. 24). Before reading this chapter, had you ever heard of this silencing? According to Claiborne, why does it happen?
- 3. "Many crime victims feel that execution circumvents true justice. These survivors would rather see the offender take responsibility for what they caused rather than just terminating their lives" (p. 28). Have you ever considered how execution might circumvent "true jus-



tice"? Describe your idea of "true justice"—what are its characteristics?

CHAPTER THREE DEATH AND GRACE IN THE BIBLE

- 1. Claiborne asks, "Does the Bible really support the death penalty? And even more precisely, does the Bible support the contemporary practice of execution as it exists today?" (p. 45). Before reading this chapter, how would you have answered these questions? How would you answer them now?
- 2. How does God deal with Cain in Genesis (p. 46)? How might God's treatment of Cain after his murder of Abel inform our own society's treatment of murderers?
- 3. Claiborne suggests that "there are some major problems with the simple view that 'the Bible has the death penalty in it, and so it's okay'" (p. 50). What are some of those problems? And how do we decide what in the Bible was meant for ancient readers and what is meant for us today? How have you personally handled this distinction?

CHAPTER FOUR THE LIMITS OF AN EYE FOR AN EYE

1. In this chapter, Claiborne addresses two ideas that "stand at the center of those who want to argue that the Bible supports the death penalty": first, that justice is



- achieved by "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" and, second, that "all governments are established by God and given the sword in order to restrain evil and exact justice" (p. 61). In your opinion, which of these is a stronger argument for the death penalty? Why?
- 2. On pages 68 to 70, Claiborne describes the difference he believes Jesus makes to the "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" argument. How would you describe that difference?
- 3. How might John Howard Yoder's concept of "revolutionary subordination" help you in your understanding of how best to respect and, at times, resist the governing authorities (p. 75)?

CHAPTER FIVE THE MOST FAMOUS EXECUTION IN HISTORY

- 1. "At the heart of Christianity is an executed Savior. He was a convicted felon, tried and found guilty, jailed, shamed, and sentenced to die at the hands of the state. ... Jesus was given the death penalty and executed" (p. 82). Before reading this book, had you ever seen the crucifixion from this perspective? Either way, how does it strike you now? How does viewing Jesus as an executed criminal change how we understand Jesus and the movement he started?
- 2. Claiborne quotes theologian James Cone: "The cross has helped me deal with the brutal legacy of the lynching tree, and the lynching tree helped me to understand



- the tragic meaning of the cross" (p. 98). What does Cone mean by this?
- 3. "God did not need blood. God *chose* to bleed with us and show us a way to stop our patterns of bloodshed. The crucifixion was an act of divine solidarity and costly forgiveness" (p. 109). What role should the crucifixion of Jesus play in contemporary Christian discussions about the death penalty? How might the cross inform those discussions?

CHAPTER SIX THE EARLY CHRISTIANS AND EXECUTION

- 1. "In the bloodstained Roman Empire ... followers of Jesus were a contrast culture, a holy counterculture; they stood on the side of life" (p. 125). What witness did such a "holy counterculture" give back then? What witness could such a "holy counterculture" give today?
- 2. On pages 131 to 135, Claiborne mentions five principles that can be extracted from the earliest Christians' stance on and around issues related to the death penalty. Which of these principles is most convincing for you? Which of these principles is least convincing for you?
- 3. What stands out to you after learning more about the earliest Christians' response to the death penalty in their time and place? What can we learn from them in our own time and place?



CHAPTER SEVEN DEATH ON THE RUN

- 1. Of all the statistics that Claiborne cites in this chapter, which caught you by surprise? Why is that?
- 2. "Could it be that we will look back a generation from now and think of the death penalty like we now think of slavery? Defenders of the death penalty most concede that there has been a moral arc to how we understand state executions over time. The question then becomes, Where is this moral arc taking us?" (p. 155). What do you make of Claiborne's "moral arc" argument here? Do you see this as helpful? Why or why not?
- 3. Claiborne tells the story of Manny and Bill Babbitt in this chapter (pp. 164–168). What can this story teach us about those who receive the death penalty, as well as those family members who are left behind?

CHAPTER EIGHT RACE, THE DEATH PENALTY, AND LYNCHING

- 1. "If we are going to talk about race and the death penalty, then we must also talk about the suppressed history of lynching in the United States" (p. 169). After reading this chapter, how would you explain why this connection between race, the death penalty, and lynching is important?
- 2. "As Americans, we *need* to hear the story of lynchings" (p. 172). What did you first learn about lynchings? How



- might you now put yourself in a position to hear more of these stories?
- 3. "Even though African Americans make up only 13 percent of the nation's population, 42 percent of death row inmates are black, and 34 percent of those executed since 1976 have been black" (p. 177). Before reading this chapter, had you heard of this imbalance? How does reading about it now sit with you? What's the conversation about race and the justice system we need to be having?

CHAPTER NINE THE DEATH PENALTY'S HALL OF SHAME

- In this chapter, Claiborne tells a few stories of "those who have been executed despite serious doubts and, in some cases, even concrete evidence of their innocence" (p. 193). What do these stories reveal about the current state of the American judicial system in general and the use of the death penalty in particular?
- 2. According to Claiborne, how is economics a "determinant of execution"? (p. 199).
- 3. Claiborne cites numerous examples of botched executions that occurred over the past five or ten years—those of Brandon Rhode, Romell Broom, Joseph Amrine, Clayton Lockett, Charles Warner, and more. Do you recognize these names? Did you hear about them when the stories first broke? Why or why not?



CHAPTER TEN PUTTING A FACE ON THE ISSUE

- 1. "In the end it wasn't the facts or the debates that convinced me. It was the stories that changed my mind on the death penalty" (p. 207). What role should stories play in conversations about whether or not we should have the death penalty? How much weight should these stories be given?
- 2. "The names of those who have been executed in the United States since 1976 have been listed on the bottom of every page in the book. Every name a child of God" (p. 207). Have you noticed these names? How does it feel to know by name those who have been executed?
- 3. As Claiborne writes, "Billy Neal Moore's story is not just a good story. It is a gospel story. It is a resurrection story" (p. 214). Had Moore been executed, could we still describe his story in this way? Why or why not?

CHAPTER ELEVEN PUTTING A FACE ON THE INNOCENT

1. Writing about the story of Curtis McCarty, Claiborne reflects, "As I listened to him, I had a hard time imagining what it must have been like to be accused, much less convicted, of a crime you didn't even know about before your arrest" (p. 221). Though it's clearly impossible to do so fully, put yourself in McCarty's shoes for a moment. How does being in that situation make you feel?



- 2. "For every nine executions there has been one exoneration. And for every hundred people condemned to die, four are likely innocent. What if other institutions had that same track record?" (p. 222). How is it possible for the death penalty to continue in spite of such a high margin of error?
- 3. "When it comes to innocence, there is a conundrum. On the one hand, we want prompt justice; on the other hand, it usually takes at least ten years to prove innocence after a guilty verdict" (p. 225). In your opinion, what is the best way to address this conundrum?

CHAPTER TWELVE THE HAUNTED EXECUTIONERS

- 1. Before reading this chapter, had you ever considered the impact of executions on those who perform them? Why or why not? (p. 228).
- 2. "Over and over I have heard [executioners, wardens, corrections officers, and administrators enforcing the death penalty] assert that 'we are just not meant to have that kind of power' over life and death" (p. 228). Why do you think this is a common response for these people in this situation? How might this common response inform our understanding of the death penalty?
- 3. The story of Ron McAndrew (pp. 228–233) puts a human face to the anonymous label of "executioner." What stood out to you in his story?



CHAPTER THIRTEEN A NEW VISION OF JUSTICE

- 1. "The word 'justice' gets abused and misused. People demand 'justice' all the time but have very different things in mind as they call for it" (p. 249). When you think of "justice," what comes to mind? Who or what has led you to think that way?
- 2. Claiborne quotes Howard Zehr, who notes that restorative justice is "a process to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible" (p. 253). How does this view of restorative justice compare with that of the traditional criminal justice approach?
- 3. Imagine if the United States stopped practicing "criminal justice" and started practicing "restorative justice" (pp. 253–254). How would our society look different? What would have to change? What could stay the same?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN MAKING DEATH PENALTY HISTORY

 "It is a well-established fact that it costs more to kill someone than to keep someone in prison for life" (p. 273). Have you ever heard the opposite argued? If so, by whom?



- 2. "I told him to do what Jesus would do," says Mother Teresa about what she told a United States governor about an execution in his state. Why is this simple line so powerful? What does it say about Jesus?
- 3. Claiborne tells the story of Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove and his community, the Rutba House, and their involvement in the case of Kenneth Lee Boyd (pp. 282–286). What can we learn from this story about how to take action in situations such as this?

FINAL QUESTIONS

- 1. Has reading this book changed how you view the death penalty? How so?
- 2. Has reading this book changed how you view justice? How so?

