

Unmoved

From the Editors in the [Oct 28, 2015](#) issue



Kelly Gissendaner was a 2011 graduate of the Certificate in Theological Studies program at Lee Arrendale State Prison, Alto, Georgia. Photo by Ann Borden, Emory Photo Video

If ever there were a sympathetic figure on death row, Kelly Renee Gissendaner was it. She was repentant about her role in the killing of her husband (she organized it, though she didn't actually do it). She had reformed her life, made a powerful confession of Christian faith, and even graduated from a prison program in theology. At the end, she had the support of many church leaders, including Pope Francis, who pleaded for her life. It wasn't enough. Late last month the state of Georgia executed her, the first woman to be executed in Georgia in 70 years. ([See the news story.](#))

What does it mean for the movement against the death penalty that the Georgia Board of Pardon and Parole was not swayed by appeals for clemency in a case as compelling as Gissendaner's?

It suggests, for one thing, how much more work is needed to convince Americans—especially white Protestant Americans—that the death penalty is immoral. According to 2014 research by the Public Religion Research Institute, 59 percent of white evangelicals and 52 percent of white mainline Protestants favor the use of the death penalty.

One would think that a people who believe in the gospel of second chances would oppose a form of justice that closes off the possibility of changing one's life. Karl Barth wrote that "the death sentence imposed on human criminals has already been

executed. God gave His only Son for this very purpose . . . Which category of particularly great sinners is exempted from the pardon effect on the basis of the death penalty carried out at Calvary?"

Opposition to the death penalty is often spurred more by practical considerations than theological ones. Many people have come to realize that the death penalty is applied disproportionately to people of color and little means. Death penalty convictions have often proved to depend on mistaken evidence and botched legal procedures. The odds that an innocent person will be put to death are high—and just one such miscarriage of justice is a price too high to pay.

On theological grounds, however, minds have not changed as much. The notion that the death penalty serves as a legitimate deterrent of crimes remains strong, despite sociological evidence that calls it into question. And the belief that murder is the state's just retribution for murder is deeply entrenched.

Criminal justice should be about protecting society and rehabilitating prisoners so that they can potentially rejoin it. That the state killed Gissendaner despite the evidence of a changed life points to a desire for retribution rather than reformation.

Christians need to hear the cries for justice voiced by the families of murder victims. But we also need to ask whether justice for the murdered might best come not in another death but in the form of a reformed life, such as the one Gissendaner was living in prison.