

Do just the good people have dignity?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Late last week, President Obama [ordered a review of the specifics as to how the death penalty is administered](#) at the state level. This came in response to the sad episode in which Clayton Lockett, convicted for the horrific murder of Stephanie Neiman, [died of an apparent heart attack shortly after a botched lethal injection](#).

The administration's step is a good one, but it's hardly bold or brave. While the president called Americans to consider "difficult and profound questions" about capital punishment in this country, the relevant issues around *how* we put people to death don't seem too tough to me. Should executions be drawn out and excruciatingly painful? Should they be inequitably applied? Should they occasionally kill people wrongly convicted of crimes?

No. God have mercy on us, no.

No doubt such questions must be raised anyway, because it's not like governmental officials are unanimously outraged by what happened to Clayton Lockett.

[Oklahoma's governor maintains that "justice was served"](#) when this prisoner basically went through torture and then died of his injuries on the State's watch. Plenty of commentators agree. The administration's got its work cut out for it here.

But who will lead our national review of whether we should be killing killers at all? Not Obama, at least not now—[he maintains](#) that he supports the death penalty. (Though perhaps his views on this subject will at some point join those on same-sex marriage in "evolving" back to what they were before he started running for president.) Not Attorney General Eric Holder, [who has stated more directly](#) his personal opposition to the death penalty but maintains that it's his job to enforce the law anyway.

And certainly not [the prominent president of the flagship seminary of the largest Protestant denomination in America](#). Al Mohler's essay acknowledges that the death penalty as applied has its problems. But his main point is that overall, Christians should support capital punishment.

Mohler's argument comes mostly from scripture, yet he doesn't mention Jesus or the Gospels. Jonathan Merritt's [got that one covered](#). Even more troubling to me is Mohler's appeal to dignity: "Our cultural loss of confidence in human dignity and the secularizing of human identity has made murder a less heinous crime in the minds of many Americans."

That's an astonishing argument. It relies on a sense of dignity that applies to some people but not others—a dignity that depends on being innocent and decent. It's not *human* but *good person* dignity: if those pesky secularists hadn't talked us out of believing in dignity, more people would believe that really bad people who kill good people *stop having dignity*.

Yet Mohler's conservative Protestant tribe has what you might call a robust tradition of maintaining that no one is entirely good—and that God's goodness is big enough for all of us. Evangelicals may not always talk about dignity like Catholics and mainliners do, but sin-and-grace language will do just fine here: no sin is heinous enough to put anyone beyond the reach of grace. Anyone can be redeemed—to live an abundant life in Christ, not just to go to heaven after the state kills them.

It drives me crazy that this belief in grace and redemption hasn't been enough to galvanize evangelical support for ending the death penalty altogether. Of course, such a thing would rely on something neither Mohler nor the governor of Oklahoma seems to be doing: seeing death row inmates as actual human beings.

(For more on that, see these two provocative but very different posts, one by [Shane Claiborne](#) and the other by [Conor Friedersdorf](#).)