

A BIBLICAL DISCUSSION OF END OF LIFE ISSUES

Thinking through assisted suicide and
euthanasia through the lens
of faith



CARE
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YOU BELIEVE

WRITTEN BY **CHRIS BUTTENS** OF
CARE'S PUBLIC AFFAIRS TEAM.

INTRODUCTION

The challenge of how to deal with human suffering and life coming to an end is not a new one. The same is true for the debate around legalised assisted suicide and euthanasia. These issues are the topic of much discussion amongst activists, in the media, on occasion in the Courts, and in some political circles. However, they are not spoken about much amongst Christians.

Of course, on one level 'suffering' – particularly struggling towards the end of life – is undesirable and something we seek to avoid. It's feared by many and can be intensely painful and heart-rending for both the sufferer and loved ones who feel powerless to act.

For Christians, any discussion about suffering, life and death must be framed in the context of faith in a sovereign God who is supremely in control, whose love and attention does not waver according to circumstances (Psalm 136) and whose ways are beyond our understanding (Isaiah 55:8,9; Job 36:26). Helpfully, John Piper, reflecting on suffering in the life of

Job, writes '**[the aim of suffering] is that our faith might be refined, our holiness might be enlarged, our soul might be saved, and our God might be glorified.'**

Christians trust God with their lives in this world and that to come – indeed, our hope is secure in the saving work of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 6:19) – and so too should we trust Him with the time and circumstances of our death.

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With our hope secure in Christ and His victory over death certain (1 Cor. 15:55-57) we are called to live in this world as God's children, not conforming to its patterns but offering ourselves as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1,2). But we can all too easily follow the prevailing wisdom of our culture rather than the eternal truth of the Bible. This is true of many areas of our lives, including how we approach matters of life and death.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.."

Isaiah 55:8-9

BACKGROUND

A survey of 17,000 evangelicals conducted by the Evangelical Alliance and published in January 2011 revealed that although 60 per cent of people thought that assisted suicide was always wrong, 40 per cent were either unsure or disagreed. This is a snapshot of evangelicals and not a complete picture; however, it nevertheless provides food for thought.

Christians are to love the Lord and their neighbour (Mark 12: 28-31) – to show compassion in response to suffering is natural. The God of the Bible is deeply, unfailingly loving and compassionate (see Psalm 86:15; Isaiah 49:13; Matthew 9:36; John 3:16 to name but a few) – but our perspective on what that means can sometimes be more dependent upon our circumstances rather than upon His perfect character.

Scripture is 'God-breathed' (2 Timothy 3:16,17), 'living and active' (Hebrews 4:12), and it is there – first and foremost – that Christians must look, rather than to the popular gods of our culture: autonomy, individualism and comfort.

The noted ethicist, Professor John Wyatt, reminds us that biblical thought always draws a line between the experience of suffering and the sufferer themselves. Our immediate circumstances can understandably draw us in with relative

ease, though, and stop us from trusting in God's 'unfailing love' (Psalm 13:5). The Bible tells us that our lives are not our own. We are made in God's image, by God and through God, for God and for His fame and renown, and not ultimately for our comfort here and now.

The purpose of this short paper is not to expound definitions of euthanasia or assisted suicide (CARE has other resources to this end); nor is it the intention that Christians should feel guilty. Instead, the aim is to help us raise our eyes first and foremost to view God rightly as our Creator and ourselves as created beings accountable to Him. Everything else flows from understanding this. Without a robust applied understanding of the truth of scripture, it's all too easy for the prevailing wisdom of our culture – or indeed our own thoughts, desires and longings – to shape our thinking, attitude and practice. Rather, it must be shaped by our faith in the Living God and His eternal wisdom.

What follows is an exploration of some Biblical fundamentals of our identity which will encourage us, strengthen our faith in the goodness and sovereignty of the Living God, and help us to apply truth to this debate, instead of attempting to make the debate fit the truth we define or desire.

CREATION

WE ARE CREATED FOR HIM

The extraordinary, incomprehensible, glorious truth is that humans are created in God's likeness (Genesis 1:26,27). We are not random compositions of cells, not machine-like automatons, not highly-evolved animals, but image-bearers of God! Ultimately, our bodies aren't our bodies at all – they belong to Him! (1 Corinthians 6:13b).

We have been 'knit together'; we are 'fearfully and wonderfully made' (Psalm 139:13,14); 'the very hairs of your head are all numbered' (Luke 12:7). We mustn't believe the lie of our present age – so often implicit in the debate on assisted suicide – that human lives (or perhaps just those who are lacking in capacity or aren't able to contribute to society) are meaningless; that we are mere accidents of biology. **We are created beings made by and for a Creator God.** Every cell in every thing

holds together because Jesus says it should (Colossians 1:15-17). What we do with our bodies therefore is of immense importance – this is true of all aspects of our lives, including how we live and how we die.


"Every cell in every thing holds together because Jesus says it should"

Assisted suicide and euthanasia entirely undermine and are an affront to our image-bearer status. We are beautiful images of God's creation, made a little lower than the heavenly beings (Psalm 8:5). Employing our bodies to do anything other than honour and obey the Lord is not an expression of freedom, but one of slavery to the sin from which we have been set free by Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross.



"You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor."

Psalm 8:5



"For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect."

1 Peter 1:18-19

REDEMPTION WE HAVE BEEN BOUGHT BY HIM

We're valuable and valued, not because of our righteousness or anything commendable in us, but because of God's mercy and goodness. This found expression came to fruition through the redemptive power of the blood of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:7,8; 1 Peter 1:18,19). We've been redeemed – bought back at a price – and are free from what Paul describes as the yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1). We're no longer under the law but, because of Jesus' death on the cross, we're free to live as 'obedient slaves' or servants to righteousness and godliness by His grace (Romans 6:15-23).

The glorious, unfathomable, mysterious truth to which the Christian can cling is that 'while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). He was broken, bearing our sins bodily upon the Cross. We 'were bought at a price' (1 Corinthians 6:20).

We owed a debt we couldn't pay. Our lives have been paid for and are not our own, and this must impact our approach to assisted suicide and euthanasia. How we respond to the extravagant grace and mercy we've received and experienced speaks to how highly or otherwise we value Christ's sacrifice for us.

RESURRECTION

WE WILL BE RAISED BY HIM

'By His power God raised the Lord from the dead, and He will raise us also.' (1 Corinthians 6:14). The future for our bodies is that they will be raised on the last day just as Jesus Christ was raised (1 Corinthians 15:20). We need to understand what this means.


Jesus Christ suffered both bodily and spiritually and He was raised in both body and spirit. Jesus Christ was there 'in the beginning' (John 1:1-5), and His body itself is eternal – changed and transformed, yes, but the same body. So, too, are our bodies eternal.

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Paul explains that it's foolish to think of our bodies being aesthetically the same as they are now when we're raised on the last day. He writes, 'the body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it

is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body' (1 Corinthians 15: 42-44). 'Natural' bodies are time-bound and therefore only temporarily alive, whereas 'spiritual' bodies are no less material but, like Jesus' body when He appeared to His disciples after the resurrection, are fit for existence with God eternally (see also 1 Corinthians 2:14-3:3). **Jesus Christ 'will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body'** (Philippians 3:20,21).

Therefore, we can say confidently that the future is not only spiritual, but also physical. As a result **it matters greatly what we do with our bodies in this life.** Choosing assisted suicide for yourself or assisting another is entirely at odds with this understanding of all it means to be made in God's image; the moral and ethical decisions Christians make have eternal ramifications.



"By His power God raised the Lord from the dead, and He will raise us also."

1 Corinthians 6:14



"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet He did not sin."

Hebrews 4:15

UNITED WE HAVE BEEN JOINED TO HIM

We are joined individually to Christ through the Church, bodily and spiritually - 'our bodies are members of Christ himself' (1 Corinthians 6:15). However, **we're also united with Christ and share His inheritance because of what He has done** (Romans 6:5,6).

Experiencing suffering or watching someone else suffer may feel and seem painful, lonely and seemingly insurmountable. If we have to rely on our own strength this may be true;

however, Christ - who was 'tempted in every way, just as we are - yet [He] was without sin' (Hebrews 4:15) - is greater. Jesus is with us. We are united with Him, and enabled by His strength and power to persevere and to endure - for our good and for His glory. Indeed, when the world seems to crumble around us and we're overwhelmed by all the plates we cannot keep spinning, it remains true that God is in control - we can have supreme confidence in Him.

DWELLING PLACE WE ARE A HOME FOR HIM

'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?' writes Paul (1 Corinthians 6:19). **The Holy Spirit, Paul tells us, lives within each individual Christian** (1 Corinthians 6:17) but what does it actually mean?

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The writer of Chronicles, regarding the building of the first temple by King Solomon, records this:

'When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. The priests could not enter the temple of the LORD because the glory of the LORD filled it. When all the Israelites saw the fire coming down and the LORD's glory above the temple, they knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshipped and gave thanks to the Lord, saying: 'He is good; His love endures forever.'" (2 Chronicles 7:1,2)

A temple is an incredible thing – it is where God's presence with His people is symbolised, the place filled with 'the glory of the Lord'. The description of Solomon's temple with its burnt offerings and sacrifices point us towards God and ultimately to Jesus, the ultimate blood sacrifice. Jesus Christ is Immanuel – 'God with us' (Isaiah 7:14) – and it's through Him, by faith, that we enter into the presence of the Father.

As Tim Chester notes in his book *'Captured by a Better Vision'*: 'All that the temple represented is now a reality in your life. God's glorious, holy, awesome, terrifying presence is in you, through the Holy Spirit.' **It is vitally important for us to understand the holiness of who we are, of who God has made us by the power of the Holy Spirit.** Our God is very different from us – He is 'enthroned exalted over all the nations holy,' (Psalm 99:1-3) But, if you are a Christian who has called on the name of the Lord by faith, you have already been 'sanctified in Jesus Christ' – you, too, are blameless and are called to be holy and live reflecting God's holiness (1 Corinthians 1:2).





WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

We have to acknowledge that there may be times for some of us when the thought that it might be easier or better for suffering and pain to end surfaces – perhaps our own struggles seem insurmountable, or that of a friend or loved one. Such suffering beyond bearing seems incompatible with a loving God who desires good for us, and therefore euthanasia or assisted suicide become appealing, or acceptable, or even essential.

Practically, for many people nearing the end of their life, being a burden, fear of dying badly or anticipated suffering – either for themselves or for loved ones – are drivers of assisted suicide and euthanasia. It's so important for those who are dying to be met with prompt and excellent care, which in the vast majority of cases, provides effective relief of physical pain and other suffering

which may be more existential. Indeed, **a wonderful, practical way we can love our neighbour is through supporting the hospice movement which seeks to do just this.**

The law – which currently in the UK prohibits encouraging or assisting suicide – is there to protect the vulnerable; those for whom we have a clear, Christ-modelled, Biblical mandate to speak for, cherish and protect (see Proverbs 31:8,9, Galatians 6:2, Psalm 82:3,4, Matthew 22:39, Isaiah 1:17, Micah 6:8 for just a handful of examples). Without the protection of the law, or when state-approved means of ending life are legalised, our vulnerable elderly, disabled and sick lose their safety net, which may lead to a pressure to end their lives – both overt and more subtly applied or experienced.

We all want a "good death", but a desire for a good death does not lead inexorably towards legalised assisted suicide or euthanasia. **For Christians, particularly, we have to weigh heavily the reality that death is not the end.** Indeed, because of this, we need to take assisted suicide and euthanasia especially seriously – particularly in light of its impact upon the vulnerable.

Christians shouldn't be aloof and removed from the trials and suffering of others, but nor should we be swayed by hollow compassion which fails to honour the dignity and wonder of who each individual has been created to be and what he or she has been created for. In God's eyes human dignity is inherent, it cannot be lost.

As John Wyatt notes in his excellent book, *Matters of Life and Death*: 'human beings are Godlike beings which we should respond to in a number of ways: with wonder, respect, empathy and above all protection from abuse, harm and manipulation.' It's helpful to consider what our goal as Christians should be with respect to those nearing the end of their life or suffering in some significant way. **Rather than minimising suffering, our aim must surely be to pursue the fostering of a society and culture which maximises care.** If our only goal is to simply minimise suffering, then there'll be circumstances where the most effective way of achieving this will be to end the life of the person who is suffering. However, God's way is

steadfast love through suffering; and for us, that looks like maximising care for the vulnerable and those who're suffering.

Euthanasia and assisted suicide are not a merciful release. Sadly, for many, they're simply propelled towards a judgement which they won't be prepared for. **We therefore mustn't underestimate the power of hope.** We trust and hope in God our Father who cares for us (1 Peter 5:7), we trust and hope in Christ the Son who saved and intercedes for us (Hebrews 7:25), we trust and hope in the Spirit who comforts us (John 14:26). 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18 paints an extraordinary picture of togetherness, permanence and true reality as Christ returns. It isn't impersonal or abstractly spiritual. It is the restoration of all things – we will be fully known and fully loved, far beyond the imperfections of the here and now. It's this hope which we can offer.

We're called to honour the Lord Jesus Christ. That means we need to know Him. We need to know that He is infinitely better than death, which He has defeated, and that one day 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' (Revelation 21:4)

Assisted suicide, euthanasia and death itself are not easy for us to consider. But we've forgotten what it means to rely upon one another, to bear one

another's burdens – that our lives are not lived in isolation. **Assisted suicide and euthanasia have an impact far beyond the person who dies and have profound implications for society at large.** All of us want to have a say over how we die, but this should lead us towards alleviating the fear of dying by making exemplary palliative care universal. Not by making it easier to end your life or have it ended for you by legalising assisted suicide or euthanasia whilst at the same time endangering the vulnerable, elderly and disabled.

In these difficult debates **it's imperative that we ensure we're informed** and have turned first and foremost to the

truth of scripture as we seek answers, rather than elsewhere. **Proponents of euthanasia and assisted suicide are ultimately settling for less – but we don't have to.**

As we look to scripture, wonderfully we find a God whose thoughts are not our thoughts and whose ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8,9). A God who offers a perfect vision of a human society for human flourishing and for true dignity, dependent not on what you can contribute or even who you are, but dependent entirely upon who He is and what He's done.





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CARE (Christian Action Research & Education) | 53 Romney St, London, SW1P 3RF | 020 7233 0455 |
mail@care.org.uk | Charity No: 1066963 | Scottish Charity No: SC038911