

David Robertson takes a biblical look at 'Voluntary Euthanasia Reassessed'



Is there a Christian case for ASSISTED DYING?

key points

This very recent book was written in order to undermine the perceived religious opposition to voluntary euthanasia, and claims to argue a Christian case.

The reviewer counters that the few biblical quotes are taken out of context and misused, that the theological arguments are woefully inadequate, and that there is an inappropriate and non-Christian emphasis on autonomy.

He concludes: 'The highly selective and infrequent use of the Bible, the pick 'n' mix theology, the fundamentalist view of human autonomy, and the slapdash use of Church history do not constitute a 'Christian' case at all'.

Paul Badham is an Anglican priest, a patron of *Dignity in Dying*, and Professor of Theology and Religious Studies in the University of Wales, Lampeter. It is therefore significant when such a man publishes on the 'Christian' case for voluntary euthanasia. Does this book live up to its title? Is there really a Christian case?

We would do well to hold to what Professor Badham states: 'If one is attempting to make a Christian case for any position it is axiomatic that one must attempt to build on a foundation of Christian belief, and in allegiance to the teaching and example of Jesus Christ'. Exactly. But how are we to know what Christian belief and the teaching and example of Jesus Christ are?

The answer of course is the Bible – a point apparently conceded by Badham when he accepts Noel Biggar's self critique of his book *Aiming to Kill*¹ for containing 'barely a single handful of direct references to the text of the Bible' and that therefore 'some Christians might think that his approach can hardly be truly Christian'. There are numerous moral, rational, societal, legal and anecdotal arguments both for and against voluntary euthanasia, and this review will not examine all of them. We are specifically concerned with 'the Christian case' and therefore with the criteria Badham himself establishes. What does the Bible say? What does Jesus teach?

Out of context

Badham makes a moving anecdotal case from the death of his parents and other close relatives. Indeed reading this account in 'the personal dimension', one can fully understand his support

for voluntary euthanasia. Who would not want to relieve the suffering of those involved? But there are other issues – not least the provision of palliative care, the wider consequences for society, and the role of the doctor.

The biggest problem and inconsistency with the book is that the vast majority of its 123 pages is concerned with many of the other arguments and very little with the Bible. Even when mentioned, it is done out of context and in a way that anyone with a reasonable understanding of both Scripture and logic would find puzzling. As a result the theological understanding is extremely limited. Indeed the whole impression is given of someone who has pre-determined the final result, and in effect hunts for quotes to find support. If we are honest this is something we all have to beware, but it is a horrendous way to treat the Word of God – making it say whatever we want it to say, while completely ignoring or dismissing what disagrees with us. As Augustine said, 'If you believe in the Bible what you like, and leave out what you do not like, it is not the Bible you believe but yourself'.

Misuse of Scripture

Leaving aside citations to Ecclesiasticus and other Apocryphal books, Badham's use of Scripture is quite extraordinary. This includes using Jesus' teaching that 'no one by taking thought can add anything to their span of life'² as somehow being opposed to modern day healthcare; managing to imply that Jesus' teaching 'no one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord'³ is an example of humans choosing when to die; using Paul's magnificent statement 'for me to live is Christ and to die is gain'⁴ as an example of choosing voluntary

death; and declaring that there are six cases of assisted dying in the Old Testament – although he only mentions two, Samson and Saul.

Taking these two alone, they offer no evidence at all for the current debate. Samson wanted to kill as many Philistines as possible – it was not about committing suicide.⁵ The fact that Saul asked to be killed is described in the Bible as something that happened – without comment.⁶ Badham admits this but nonetheless tries to suggest that because there is no negative comment, this is evidence for assisted dying. Only if one takes the most extreme view of the Bible as little more than a collection of moralistic tales is it possible to take such interpretations seriously. It is a classic example of a post-modern reading of Scripture, making it mean whatever one wants.

Theological arguments inadequate

When we move away from the handful of biblical texts cited, perhaps we can expect 'Christian' arguments based upon theology. But again these are woefully inadequate. Using doctrines of resurrection and eternal life to imply that Christians should want to ask for assisted suicide is the equivalent of the medieval Spanish peasants who had to be prevented from mass suicide because they wanted to go to a 'better place'.

Of course Christians can look forward to what comes after death, but death is still the last enemy and we are not to face it lightly. All our days are determined by the Lord⁷ and we must not overthrow God's sovereignty in that respect. Again, as with the citation of Scripture, this is real pick'n'mix theology. For example, Badham clearly rejects the doctrines of Hell and judgment – despite telling us to adhere to the teaching of Jesus who taught more about Hell than anyone else in the Bible.

Speaking of Christ, what of the logic that says that because we are to love our neighbour as ourselves, then we are to think of what our neighbour would want and grant it to them? Since when was human desire the absolute? If my neighbour desires my money or my wife does that make it right? And who am I to determine what is best? Sometimes we cannot make those kinds of decisions.

Emphasis on autonomy

Badham emphasises the doctrine of human autonomy. In this he is not alone. A 2005 report⁸ by the Department of Human Services in Oregon analysed the end-of-life concerns of all who had actually obtained a medically assisted death between 1998 and 2004. The major concerns were losing autonomy (87%), being less able to engage in enjoyable activities (84%), losing dignity (80%) and losing control of bodily functions (59%). Astonishingly, relief from pain or concern about pain were only cited by 22% as a reason. (Badham admits that 'No one who obtained assistance to die actually suffered from uncontrolled pain'.)

But the quest for human autonomy is not a Christian one. Was it not the original temptation that we should 'be like God'?⁹ The desire for human autonomy has created so much harm and disruption in human relationships and has had consequent effects on the environment. How strange that a 'Christian' case for euthanasia rests on something the Bible regards as sin.

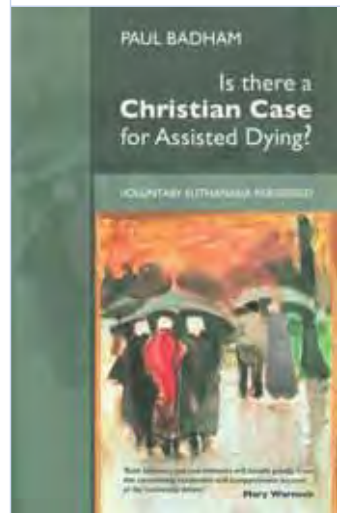
Sometimes there is an astonishing naivety about human nature in the argument. Badham admits that he does not discuss the financial arguments for or against the legalisation of euthanasia. He simply states *ex cathedra* that 'it is not the case that the motivation of saving money is currently a factor'. But according to the scriptures, the worship of mammon and the desire for wealth are significant factors in human decision-making – 'for the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil'.¹⁰ This is clearly relevant to life and death decisions regarding issues like dwindling inheritance, hospital funding, and 'being a burden'.

This naivety is positively dangerous when Badham utters the chilling words 'if the average age of death continues to rise much faster than the number of years of healthy life we can expect to have, there will come a time when adequate support for an ageing population will become economically unsustainable'. He gets away from this by declaring that this problem is 'something that may be left to the next generation of moralists'. But that will not do. It is here that the slippery slope argument comes into play. It is not the biblical or Christ-like thing to ignore the consequences of our actions today for tomorrow. To his credit, Badham admits that 'what was never foreseen was that legislation to allow abortion in hard cases would lead to 200,000 legal abortions a year'. Given this past experience, it is not unreasonable to 'foresee' what will happen to our elderly as they become 'economically unsustainable'.

Conclusion

Professor Badham has written this book in order to undermine the perceived religious opposition to voluntary euthanasia. He is trying to create the impression that this is a debate within Christian circles. He does not succeed. His arguments in favour of voluntary euthanasia are largely based upon personal experience, anecdotal evidence, reports from authors who support his pre-determined conclusion, and an appeal to emotion. The highly selective and infrequent use of the Bible, the pick'n'mix theology, the fundamentalist view of human autonomy, and the slapdash use of Church history do not constitute a 'Christian' case at all.

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