

END OF LIFE: a better way?

what the Bible says about euthanasia

Laurence Crutchlow explains the Bible's clear teaching of a better way





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Has modern medicine fallen victim to its own success? UK life expectancy continues to increase, though at a slowing rate. The last 150 years have seen a significant fall in infant mortality, followed by advances in treatment of infectious disease. Many more people live into their 80s, 90s and beyond (my longest lived patient so far reached 106!).

When such longevity is accompanied by reasonable health, albeit often with a chronic condition or two, it is usually welcome. But sometimes the later years herald a diagnosis like dementia where there is a heavy burden of care for years. Worries about care costs are shared by families and governments alike. Perhaps more than cost, there is a strong fear of 'losing dignity', which also applies to much younger patients with terminal conditions.

All this is a big change from less than a century ago when many deaths were due to infections, to which patients either succumbed, or fairly quickly recovered.

Euthanasia is often proposed as a 'solution' to these problems. Occasionally someone makes a financial argument for it, but more often the arguments centre around autonomy. For some patients the idea of 'losing dignity' is enough that they want to be able to die with medical assistance before such a loss of dignity occurs. There are plenty of 'secular' rebuttals to the common arguments against euthanasia. We will not recount these here, but instead focus on what scripture has to say.

I use 'euthanasia' as a catch-all term in this article for simplicity. The arguments made from scripture can equally be applied to assisted suicide (often labelled 'assisted dying' in the media).

The term *euthanasia* is derived from Greek, and literally means an 'easy' or 'good' death. It is often called 'mercy killing'. But we can't forget that someone is killed when euthanasia is performed, whatever the motives.

how does the Bible view killing?

The sixth commandment, traditionally rendered 'Thou shalt not kill' is of course widely known well beyond Christian circles. But the Old Testament gives further information that helps us determine exactly what this commandment means.

'You shall not murder'¹ actually restates the earlier commandment of Genesis 9:6: 'Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind'. Killing is wrong; in fact it is so serious that the death penalty is warranted. The reason is given clearly – humans are made in God's image; in effect, an attack on a human is an attack on God.

The fact that the death penalty is mentioned here implies that there are some exceptions to this law. It is not quite as simple as 'do not kill'. Indeed *murder*, used in most modern translations, has varying definitions in law around the world. What does the Bible mean by it?

exceptions

The Pentateuch lays down four main circumstances in which killing another human is not murder:

FIRST

There is an *accidental killing* provision. Intention is important. Anyone who had killed *unintentionally* could flee to a 'city of refuge', in which he had some protection from 'the avenger of the blood'. When the High Priest died (naturally), this would atone for the killing, and the killer would be free.² This was a very limited provision – Deuteronomy 19:5 gives the example of an axe head flying off and killing someone. Negligence was not considered unintended,³ and neither was killing 'in hostility', even if not premeditated.⁴

SECOND

Killing in self-defence was allowed.⁵

THIRD

Killing in the context of holy war was permitted. Again, strict conditions applied,⁶ and outside the Promised Land only men could be killed, and only then if a preliminary offer of peace was refused.

FOURTH

Capital punishment was permitted in certain circumstances. More than 20 offences were included, ranging from murder to contempt of court.

It is clear that the Bible does *not* permit the shedding of 'innocent blood', which is condemned repeatedly in scripture.⁷

Putting these together shows that the Bible prohibits the *intentional killing of innocent humans*. This remains the case whatever the current legal definitions of murder, which may have begun from the sixth commandment, but are often narrower.

does this definition apply to euthanasia?

Euthanasia is certainly intentional. Indeed, in jurisdictions where assisted suicide has been legalised, there are usually strict procedures to follow which certify that it is intended. Those requesting euthanasia are neither guilty of a capital crime, nor enemy combatants in war. It should be clear that euthanasia does not fall into any of the 'exceptions' to the sixth commandment.

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A story from later in the Old Testament helpfully illustrates this. Although we should be wary of drawing our morality entirely from narrative, David's actions very much fit the interpretation of the law proposed here. 2 Samuel 1 recounts an Amalekite's despatch of the mortally injured Saul, still alive after a failed attempt at suicide.

'I happened to be on Mount Gilboa', the young man

*said, 'and there was Saul, leaning on his spear, with the chariots and their drivers in hot pursuit. When he turned around and saw me, he called out to me and I said, "What can I do?" ... Then he said to me "Stand here by me and kill me. I'm in the throes of death but I'm still alive." So I stood beside him and killed him because I knew that after he had fallen he could not survive.'*⁸

Whether the story is true (it varies from the account of Saul's death at the end of 1 Samuel 31) or the Amalekite's fabrication in order to win favour in David's eyes for despatching Saul and delivering him the crown, the new king's reaction is interesting.

'Why weren't you afraid to lift your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?',⁹ he asks. Then, apparently before receiving a reply, as if the confession in itself were sufficient grounds for a judgment to be made, he orders the Amalekite's execution.

In the mind of David at least, the compassionate killing of Saul constituted a capital offence, despite him being in great pain (presumably with peritonitis) and close to death without the possibility of analgesia and, most significantly of all, despite Saul's own request to be killed.

so if the Bible is clear, why don't all Christians agree?

We will put to one side here the question of Christians who don't accept the supreme authority of the Bible. But many who do claim to respect the authority of scripture argue that surely compassion and mercy must outweigh the requirements of the law in a situation like Saul's.

A famous UK example is Most Rev Dr George Carey, formerly Archbishop of Canterbury. Writing in the *Daily Mail* in 2014,¹⁰ he supported a change in the law to permit assisted suicide. Openly acknowledging that he'd changed his mind, he wrote that 'the old philosophical certainties have collapsed in the face of the reality of needless suffering'.

He went on to explain his position:

'I began to reconsider how to interpret Christian theology on the subject. As I did so, I grew less and

less certain of my opposition to the right to die... both the Bible and the character of God laid far more importance on open-hearted benevolence than on upholding this particular law.

As I reminded myself, one of the key themes of the gospels is love for our fellow human beings.

Indeed, Jesus's mission was underpinned with compassion for those suffering from the most dreadful conditions.'

Love and compassion are key themes of the gospels. But surely the law is also an expression of God's love for his people. Carey and others believe that the law must give way to 'compassion' – an example of *situationism*. A situationist would hold that in some situations, the 'higher principle' of love for a neighbour¹¹ leads to suspension of certain commands. Effectively a Christian could be breaking God's law, but still acting in love.

This isn't consistent with scripture. Jesus was clear that obeying the greater commandments of the law didn't negate disobedience over the lesser ones.¹² Scripture does not define 'love' as breaking God's law. Indeed the sixth commandment is specifically included in the summary 'love your neighbour as yourself'.¹³ This may come from a wrong view of scripture and poor understanding of law.

Other distortions of Christian morality that can lead to problems here include *antinomianism* ('I am saved by grace therefore the law does not apply') which is clearly rebutted by Paul in Romans 6. *Legalism* can lead us to become so obsessed with avoiding killing that we fall into *vitalism*, trying to sustain life at all costs, even in a patient that is terminally ill.

how does this look today?

Jesus was neither a situationist or an antinomian, nor a legalist or a vitalist. His way was to serve those he came into contact with, often at great cost. Following his way is not easy.

The way of the cross calls us to give our whole selves to the love and service of others, expending our time, money and energy in finding compassionate solutions to human suffering.¹⁴

It has found practical shape historically in the hospice movement and in good palliative care – pioneered in large part by Christian doctors and nurses. When a person's physical, social, psychological and spiritual needs are addressed requests for euthanasia are very rare indeed.

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But perhaps the most powerful Christian argument against euthanasia is that death is not the end. God's intervention through Christ's death and resurrection for our sins¹⁵ means that through the eyes of faith we can look forward to a new world after death with God where there is 'no more death or mourning or crying or pain'.¹⁶ For those, however, who do not know God euthanasia is not a 'merciful release' at all. It may rather be propelling them towards a judgment for which they are unprepared. It may be the worst thing we could ever do for them!¹⁷

Other articles explore the defence of his teaching in the public square (page 8–13), and its practical outworking on the wards (page 14–16). The more we are convinced that euthanasia is not God's way, the greater I hope our motivation will be to practise the compassionate, costly alternative and reflect the gospel in how we do this. ■

REFERENCES

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