

## EUTHANASIA – WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

There are two instances of euthanasia in the Bible. In the first, Abimelech, believing himself to be fatally wounded (with a fractured skull after being hit on the head by a millstone), asks his armour-bearer to kill him to spare him the 'indignity' of being killed by a woman (Judges 9:52-55). In the second, an Amalekite despatches the mortally injured Saul, still alive after a failed attempt at suicide (2 Samuel 1:6-9).

These two cases demonstrate the two main arguments for euthanasia, autonomy ('death with dignity') and compassion ('release from suffering').

The Bible tells us that human beings are unique amongst God's creatures in being made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26) and it is on this basis, after the flood, that God introduces to all humankind the death penalty for murder (Genesis 9:6,7).

The prohibition against killing *legally innocent* people is later formalised in the sixth commandment, 'You shall not murder' (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17). The Hebrew word for 'murder' is *ratsach* (Greek *phoneuo*) and its meaning is further defined in four main passages in the Pentateuch (Exodus 21:12-14; Leviticus 24:17-21; Numbers 35:16-31; Deuteronomy 19:4-13).

These passages resolve any ambiguity for us and give a precise definition of what is prohibited, namely the '*intentional* killing of an innocent human being' (Exodus 23:7; 2 Kings 21:16; Psalms 106:37,38; Jeremiah 19:4). Euthanasia clearly falls within this biblical definition. There is no provision for compassionate killing, even at the person's request and there is no recognition of a 'right to die' as all human life belongs to God (Psalms 24:1). Our lives are not actually our own. Suicide (and therefore assisted suicide) is therefore equally wrong.

Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount that we should go beyond the mere letter of the sixth commandment to fulfil the very spirit of love on which it is based (Matthew 5:21,22). We are called to walk in Jesus' footsteps, to be imitators of God, to love as he himself loved (1 John 2:6; Ephesians 5:1,2; John 13:34, 35).

Sadly, however, many Christians today are confused about euthanasia and fall prey to emotive hard cases and false dichotomies.

It is often argued that we have only two equally undesirable alternatives to choose from – either 'living hell' or the euthanasia needle – both of which are imperfect and unloving solutions.

But there is a third way – the way of the cross. It calls us to give our whole selves to the love and service of others by expending our time, money and energy in finding compassionate solutions to human suffering (Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 8:34; Philippians 2:4-11; Galatians 6:2, 10). 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 adequately tended to requests for euthanasia are very rare indeed.

But perhaps the most powerful Christian argument against euthanasia is that death is not the end. God's intervention through Christ's death for our sins and resurrection (Romans 5:8; 1 Corinthians 15:3) 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' (Revelation 21:4). For those, however, who do not know God euthanasia is not a 'merciful release' at all. It may rather be propelling them towards a judgement for which they are unprepared. It may be the worst thing we could ever do for them! (Hebrews 9:27; Revelation 20:15)

Euthanasia is wrong because God says it is wrong. Instead he points us to a better way, offering hope, love and compassionate care.

*Written by Dr Peter Saunders, Chief Executive, Christian Medical Fellowship*