

(Philippians 1:23). For the believer, the issue is not what they themselves wish (life here or there), for, as Paul so aptly put it, “*I am torn between the two*” (Philippians 1:23). The issue is, rather, what God wills.

God’s dominion includes *all* of life, which means that suffering is a part of God’s providence. Therefore, suffering that cannot be relieved by modern medical means is to be accepted as from the hand of a loving God, even when we do not understand. The purpose of suffering for the Christian is sanctification, “*to be conformed to the likeness of His Son*” (Romans 8:29); “*it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace*” for those who have been trained by it (Hebrews 12:11); “*For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all*” (I Corinthians 4:17).

Death is a part of life – there is a time to be born and a time to die – Ecclesiastes 3:2. The Christian can even welcome natural death, knowing that “*death has been swallowed up in victory*” (I Corinthians 15:54). Believers in Christ can look forward to that day when they will see Jesus “*face to face*” (I Corinthians 13:12).

In suffering and impending death, Christians see God’s sovereign hand and purpose. They look forward to a deepened relationship with God and strengthening from Him in their time of need, for “*those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength*” (Isaiah 40:31).

The Christian also sees his or her suffering and impending death as a great opportunity to minister to fellow patients, family, friends and medical staff, sharing the hope of eternal life beyond death to those who believe in Christ. Christians understand their ministry to the suffering and dying as ministering to Christ Himself (Matthew 25:40).

The Christian perspective of human life puts God in control. We trust the Author of life to allow only what ultimately benefits us (Romans 8:28). But this does not give us a passive role – we are called to be salt and light. This means to stand *for* compassionate care of the dying while standing *against* any form of killing. We are to debate intelligently, but, more importantly, we must seize opportunities to minister God’s love to those who are needy and suffering.

As we uphold a biblical view of life and death before those who advocate euthanasia, we must do so in a spirit of love and show how through Christ we can be freed from the fear of dying (Hebrews 2:14-15). Would that there be an ambassador of Christ at every hospital or hospice deathbed. These Christian volunteers could share Paul’s words of hope – “*to live is Christ and to die is gain*” (Philippians 1:21).

# Euthanasia and the Sanctity of Life

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MENNONITE BRETHREN

# Faith & Life

PAMPHLET SERIES

# Euthanasia and the Sanctity of Life

The current debate over the legitimacy of euthanasia provides an incredible opportunity for Christians to offer a compassionate alternative for those who seem to be crying out for death. That alternative speaks directly to some of the complex questions surrounding this issue, questions like: don't doctors already hasten death by stopping life support and using high doses of morphine in cancer patients? and doesn't the concept of an intolerable quality of life mean that the "right to die" is reasonable?

## Terminology

In a war of ideologies, the first casualty is often the definition of terms. Euphemisms abound. A lethal injection for an ill person is called "aid in dying" or "shortening the dying process". Denying someone legal permission to undergo assisted suicide becomes "cruelly prolonging the suffering of a dying person".

Euthanasia is defined as mercy killing, the deliberate ending of a person's life with the intent of reducing that person's suffering. The more common term is "right to die", which is really the right to be killed. In order for such a "right" to actually exist, our society would need to agree to a "duty" to provide the service.

The other common term, "death with dignity", is a euphemism for avoiding a prolonged, poor quality of life dependent on medication. Someone's hatred of dependence cannot constitute adequate justification for ending his or her life. Illness or handicap does not reduce true dignity, nor does the availability of euthanasia confer dignity upon one's existence. True "death with dignity" occurs without euthanasia in a palliative or hospice setting, where the dying are treated with respect and tenderness.

## Current Medical Practice

The natural death that occurs with the withdrawal of treatment is not euthanasia. Permitting a person to die naturally is not to be confused with knowingly taking action that will cause death. Just as natural death should not be confused with euthanasia, neither should we equate euthanasia with palliative care. Palliative care is the active relief of suffering in a terminally ill individual.

Natural death, which results from illness or degenerative processes, is the opposite of euthanasia. Even when someone requests that life not be prolonged, death results from the underlying illness, not the withdrawal of care itself. Withholding medical treatment is ethical as long as the treatment is disproportionately burdensome that is, the treatment is harder on the person than the disease, as well as relatively ineffective.

*"Ultimate decisions regarding life and death belong to God. Therefore, we hold that procedures designed to take life, including abortions, euthanasia, and assisted suicide, are an affront to God's sovereignty. We esteem the life-sustaining findings of medical science, but recognize that there are limits to the value of seeking to sustain life indefinitely. In all complex ethical decisions regarding life and death, we seek to offer hope and healing, support and counsel in the context of the Christian community".*

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CONFESSION OF FAITH, ARTICLE 14

## The Christian Worldview

The source of the "sanctity of life" concept is in the law given to Noah: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man" (Genesis 9:6). This Scripture is more than a prohibition on the taking of innocent life; it reveals the reason that killing is wrong. Created by God, we are stewards, not owners, of the lives that God has given. Life is God's gift, and its end, as its beginning, is determined by His sovereignty: "(Y)our eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (Psalm 139:16).

The Christian is *obligated* to use ordinary medical means to promote health. Christians have a moral duty to accept medical treatment if it is available and effective and it is not a burden out of proportion to the anticipated benefit. For example, refusing tube feeding because of a spinal cord injury would be tantamount to suicide and a rejection of the responsibility we have to be stewards of our lives. Conversely, refusing a risky, difficult-to-endure cancer treatment that has a limited chance of working is a moral option. Perhaps the most frequent application of this option is the "do not resuscitate order". It is morally permissible to refuse (in advance) attempts to "restart" your heart when you are in the final stage of a terminal illness.

Key here is that we are the image or likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27, I Corinthians 11:7). The value of life is therefore intrinsic and God-given. To raise a hand (or even a word - James 3:9) against a human being is an assault on God Himself.

It is true that circumstances, disabilities, suffering, and other factors can greatly affect a person's degree of happiness. Some people's physical and mental pain is so intense that they prefer death to life. Difficult as these experiences are, God's Word upholds the sanctity of life which maintains that a person's value and worth cannot be reduced by the limitations of pain, suffering, disability or what is perceived to be a low quality of life.

## God's Sovereignty

The person assured of eternity with Christ knows that to be with Christ "is better by far"