

A Christian Response to Physician Assisted Suicide

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In 1973, abortion on demand became the law of the land with the Supreme Court ruling, *Roe v. Wade*. With the devaluation of life at its earliest stages, it was only a matter of time before life would be devalued at its end stages.

Now, 40 plus years later, that time has come as demonstrated by the current push toward physician assisted suicide (PAS).

Since 1994, six states have approved physician assisted suicide. According to the organization *Death with Dignity*, 30 other states have legislation pending this year.

Laws vary by state, but most include at least one request to a licensed physician to obtain a prescription for life ending drugs. Some states require a terminally-ill diagnosis and others multiple requests. The patient requesting the life ending drugs ingests it causing their death. This is unlike euthanasia, where a doctor administers the drugs himself to either people who have requested it or not.

New Laws Will Boost Numbers

Although the U.S. numbers of reported deaths from PAS is small, they will continue to grow as more laws legalizing the practice are passed.

One only needs to look at the Netherlands and Belgium to understand how the right to die movement has grown. In 2016, 4% of all deaths in the Netherlands (6,091) were by euthanasia. In Belgium, in 2015 that number was 2,022.

The disturbing trend seen in these two countries, particularly Belgium, is the drive to euthanize people who have not made any request for death and for non-terminal reasons such as dementia, depression, mental illness or even a “completed life.”

The practice of asking a physician to prescribe you drugs to end your life is driven by two secular thoughts: a desire to eliminate suffering and the need to exercise decision making over one's death.

What Do Christians Say?

Is physician assisted suicide a legitimate practice for Christians? Let's look at some Scripture to answer that question.

What is the role of suffering in the life of a Christian? The Bible is very explicit: suffering plays a role in the strengthening of our faith (Romans 5:3-5), in our reliance on God (2 Corinthians 1:8-10), and in caring for each other (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). God is there in our sufferings, working His will for our lives.

Who determines the time of our death? As Christians we believe that God is the originator of life. He is in complete control of our lives from conception to natural death. He has a plan for us and when that plan is completed, we will go home to heaven. (Psalm 31:14-15; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20; Psalm 139:13-16; Ephesians 1:4-5; Ephesians 2:10; Job 1:21)

Story of Two Women

In 2014, two women were diagnosed with a terminal stage-four glioblastoma multiforme brain tumor. One was Brittany Maynard, a young woman who decided to move from California to Oregon so she could obtain drugs to end her life. Her view reflected our culture's view that death was a friend she welcomed in order to maintain control of her life and eliminate any future suffering. Brittany died by her own hand in 2014.

The second woman was Maggie Karner, then director of Synod's Life and Health Ministries. She viewed death as an enemy that had been defeated through the death and resurrection of her Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. God had given her life and purpose and she was determined to serve Him throughout her remaining days on this earth. Maggie died naturally in 2015.

In one of her articles prior to her death Maggie wrote: "Death sucks. And while this leads many to attempt to calm their fears by grasping for personal control over the situation, as a Christian with a Savior who loves me dearly and who has redeemed me from a dying world, I have a higher calling. God wants me to be comfortable in my dependence on Him and others, to live with Him in peace and comfort no matter what comes my way.

"As for my cancer journey, circumstances out of my control are not the worst thing that can happen to me. The worst thing would be losing faith, refusing to trust in God's purpose in my life and trying to grab that control myself."

Thank you, Maggie, for your clear focus on Jesus and giving us an example of Christian living in the face of death.

For more information on physician assisted suicide, euthanasia and other end of life issues, please visit Lutheransforlife.org.