
The Revelational Christian Ethic And Physician Assisted Suicide

Introduction

The goal of this paper is to answer the question, Should Christians support physician assisted suicide (PAS)? In answering these questions we need to systematically evaluate our moral beliefs in order to determine if they are justified and if yes, how so.

This requires a discussion about meta-ethics and applied ethics. I will attempt to describe the methodology that I believe Christians should ascribe to when trying to determine the morality of situations such as physician assisted suicide or euthanasia. My hope is that in looking at the arguments for and against, Christians will choose not to support physician assisted suicide because there is sufficient information in the Bible that should make someone exercise caution when making decisions about whether or not to choose physician assisted suicide to alleviate conditions that may arise when diagnosed with a terminal illness.

A Revelational Christian Ethic

Meta ethics is an “attempt to see behind the scene of someone’s moral presuppositions in order to discover and evaluate the beliefs and methods on which they are based”. Meta ethics is concerned with what we mean when we say good or bad, right or wrong. I believe a combination of theories is necessary to understand morality and it can be called Revelational Christian ethic.

The first book of the Bible Genesis, tells us that we are created in the image of God. Because of this there are truths that he placed in our hearts so we have an infallible intuitive knowledge of right and wrong. This does not mean that we are infallible as humans we are fallible and do things that are contrary to righteousness. God uses natural and special revelation to reveal things to his creations. These revelations can be used to resolve moral dilemmas.

Revelational Christian Ethics is the understanding that what is good, true and right is known through divine revelation. There are various forms of revelation as described above, one is called general revelation and the other one is special revelation. General revelations are truths that God gives everyone, we instinctively because of God, know these things to be true. Special revelation is “God’s activity of communicating specific truths to specific people”. For example when God spoke to Moses at the burning bush, sent prophets to deliver messages, sent Jesus to live and teach on earth and inspired the writings of the Bible these are all special revelations.

Moral guidance is provided throughout scripture and gives a solid foundation to understand what is moral and immoral. The foundation of what is good and where goodness comes from can be found in God himself and in the inspired writings of the Bible which provides the laws and principles of divine revelation. These truths are written on our hearts and we instinctively know right from wrong even as young children. God uses our emotions to guide us and he provides us with the wisdom we need to become more like him. The Bible provides all moral

absolutes and its teachings show us how to cultivate a virtuous character which brings us closer to God and gives us the ability to live a fulfilling and happy life.

A Christian approach to the issue of physician assisted suicide will require us to find a way of balancing opinions that support assisted suicide and oppose it to determine if it's moral or immoral.

Physician Assisted Suicide

Death in the physical sense is inevitable for all people. The uncertainty that comes from an incurable diagnosis leaves some people wanting to take control and may question taking their own life to minimize suffering. Physician assisted suicide involves a doctor knowingly and intentionally giving someone the knowledge and means or both to end their own life. This typically involves psychological counselling and education about lethal doses and needed to halt life. The doctor also provides the prescription.

In 1997 Oregon enacted "Oregon's Death with Dignity Act which allows those who are terminally ill to work with a physician to secure a prescription for self-administered life ending medication. This has resulted in a small percentage of the population (one tenth of 1%), most of whom were enrolled in hospice care, die in their homes peacefully. "The most frequently mentioned end-of-life concerns were: loss of autonomy, decreasing ability to participate in activities that made life enjoyable and loss of dignity". These things make it easy to see why someone may consider physician assisted suicide. As of February 2017, California, Colorado, District of Columbia, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington all have Death with Dignity statutes that allow a person to take their own life with the assistance of a physician.

Physician assisted suicide is thought by some as a caring response to the challenges of death and discomfort associated with it. In some cases the cost of care if someone is terminally ill is so great that the person doesn't want their family burdened with the debt.

Paul Badham is a professor of theology and religious studies at the University of Wales, a patron of Dignity in Dying and an ordained Anglican priest. He wrote a book titled "Is there a Christian Case for Assisted Dying" and says that Christians should not fear death but look at it as "the gateway to eternal life". He also insists that not supporting physician assisted suicide demonstrates a lack of compassion for loved ones who are facing certain death and suffering. Badham also believes that since Jesus broke the law to heal a man on the Sabbath (Mark 2:27) that he would also support physician assisted suicide out of compassion, care and love for another. In summary, the case to support physician assisted suicide is based on Jesus and his teachings, first to love God and our neighbor as ourselves and secondly, to follow the golden rule and treat others the way we wish to be treated. Meaning that if someone is suffering we should show compassion and end it.

There are several arguments against the practice of physician assisted suicide. At the heart of the deontological argument is that we, as moral agents are obligated to obey God. One argument is a belief that physician assisted suicide is a violation of the sixth of the Ten Commandments "Thou shalt not kill" in Exodus 20:13 which testifies to the sanctity of life. Some argue that murder is not the same as physician assisted suicide. Murder deprives a person of life and all that it offers and physician assisted suicide is described as a

compassionate response to someone is already dying and wants to hasten the process.

Regardless according to God murder is always wrong no matter what the circumstances are. Paul Badham used the argument that Jesus broke the law to heal on the Sabbath however he healed a man he didn't perform a mercy killing.

Another argument is that "central to the Christian gospel is the belief that suffering can be redemptive". As Christians we celebrate Good Friday every year and remember the price that was paid with the blood of Christ for our sins. The Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith contains a Declaration on Euthanasia that says "suffering is not pointless. The Catholic church holds that suffering especially suffering during the last moments of life, has a special place in God's saving plan; it is in fact a sharing in Christ's passion and a union with the redeeming sacrifice which he offered in obedience to the Father's will."

As Christians we can take comfort during these times with scripture that remind us of God promises like Deuteronomy 31:6-8 that says "Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble for the Lord your God is the one that goes with you. He will not fail or forsake you. And the Lord is the one who goes ahead of you. Do not fear or be dismayed." We should not be afraid of death we are promised life after death in Christ.

Pope Francis who is considered more liberal than his predecessors even makes statements about physician assisted suicide saying it's "false compassion and a result of our throwaway culture that devalues and dehumanizes the sick".

As stated above, there is redemptive purpose and meaning that can be found in our suffering just as Christ himself found on the cross. A strong teleological argument can be made here as well since as moral agents it's our desire to "reach an end or goal or to discover our purpose which could be revealed during the process of dying.

Genesis describes the intimate and active role that God played in creating humans in Genesis 2:7 when he breathes life into man and then he became a living being. If God played such an intimate role during the creation of life one is compelled to think that he plays an equally or even more intimate role during death.

1Corinthians 3:16-17 says "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple" which many argue would discourage taking one's life through physician assisted suicide because our bodies are not our own, they belong to God and should be used to glorify him always. Job says "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away" which is also used as an argument against physician assisted suicide because someone's death should be governed by God not by man and if we are interfering in that process, we are attempting to play God.

Steve Jobs was an executive for Apple. He died in 2011 and said during a commencement speech at Stanford University that "death is the destination we all share" he also told them that death was the "single best invention of life" because "it's life's change agent". Undoubtedly Steve felt as if he changed as he approached death. And if he had chosen to end his life after he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer those students and everyone else who has heard that speech may have not been given the opportunity to share in his journey. We never know what

God will teach us in those final days or what he wants to share with us. Personally I look forward to facing death knowing that God will be with me as I join him in heaven for eternity.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to apply the Revelational Christian Ethic to the issue of physician assisted suicide. While there are strong arguments in favor there is an even more compelling argument against it that can be found in the Bible. As Christians, we believe the Bible contains the divine and inspired writings of God. And we find in the Bible how precious life is to God. As Augustine said, "If you believe in the gospels what you like, and reject what you do not like, it is not the gospels you believe, but yourself". Augustine was an early church Father and is referred to as the "greatest theologian".

While the Bible doesn't specifically address the subject of physician assisted suicide, it does address murder, the sanctity of human life and teaches us that we should love and show compassion for others. Today, there are only six states that support physician assisted suicide, I think that says something about how apprehensive people are to change legislation to support it. The debate will continue especially as a large percentage of the population continues to age. The arguments that support PAS lack scriptural reference and substance. The Bible is rarely used to support PAS, one reference is Jesus breaking the law to heal on the Sabbath and as explained he healed on the Sabbath he didn't kill out of mercy. The other reference was the Golden Rule to treat others the way you would want to be treated. This is subjective and it could just mean that to avoid the suffering of another we use others means such as hospice and palliative care. I hope that I have at least cast some doubt on the subject of physician assisted suicide using scripture to demonstrate how Christians should approach this topic.

Bibliography

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