

Sanctity of life, compassion, Jesus and Bonhoeffer

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This paper is a plea for a nuanced and compassionate Christian response to voluntary assisted dying (VAD).

Situational context

Suicide is the choice of death over continuing life. VAD is where a dying person chooses between a slow death or a quick death—continuing life is not an option. VAD is therefore not morally equivalent to suicide. The context makes a difference to the ethics, even though the concrete action might be the same. We readily accept this contextual determinant in other areas of ethics. A surgeon wielding a knife in an operating theatre is not morally equivalent to a mafia standover thug wielding a knife on the streets, even though they are both using knives to cut someone.

Intolerable end-of-life suffering still exists and calls us to respond. Many Christian armchair ethicists choose to ignore or deny this by treating palliative care as a panacea that magically eradicates all end-of-life suffering. The reality at the bedside can be very different. Patients in palliative care units still ask for euthanasia. Many symptoms are difficult to palliate (e.g. neuropathic pain, itchiness, intractable nausea, vomiting blood or faeces, diarrhoea, constipation, incontinence, painful spasticity or cramping, paralysis, fungating wounds, shortness of breath, choking on one's own salivary secretions, slow suffocation as lungs fill with fluid, lethargy, agitation, delirium). This suffering calls for a compassionate response, not a simple denial of its existence so that Christians can sit comfortably in moral rectitude.

This begs the question of how should our attitude to VAD be formed—by clinical compassion at the bedside, or by academic discussion of legal and ethical principles in comfortable isolation away from the suffering?

Historical context

VAD is the response to a modern phenomenon unknown to previous generations of theologians and ethicists—the power of modern medicine to control and delay the dying process. Prior to the mass availability of antibiotics, major infections like pneumonia and septicemia ensured a relatively quick death. It was for good reason that pneumonia was commonly known as ‘the old man’s friend’.¹ This began to change with the mass availability of penicillin in 1944, and the medical ability to control and *delay* death has taken off in recent decades with the pharmaceutical and technological advances that are

1 A misquote of Sir William Osler who wrote of pneumonia, ‘So fatal is it in (the aged) that it has been termed the natural end of the old man.’ In William Osler, *The Principles and Practice of Medicine: Designed for the Use of Practitioners and Students of Medicine* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1892), 526, <https://archive.org/details/principlespract00osle/page/n9/mode/2up>.

capable of delaying death far beyond what is 'natural' or, in many cases, desirable. Using modern medicine to delay death has now become so culturally normative that there are cases where the courts have been used to force non-consenting minors to accept medical procedures they consider oppressive.²

Modern medical practice has also been compassionately *hastening* death long before VAD laws were introduced. A 1997 survey of doctors estimated that 30% of all Australian deaths were preceded by a medical decision explicitly intended to hasten death or not prolong life by withdrawing or withholding treatment (25% of all deaths) or by supplying or administering drugs to end life (5% of all deaths).³

In modern Western health care systems, the timing of most deaths now involves an end-of-life medical decision (to treat or not to treat, to delay or hasten death).⁴ The days of a 'natural death', where we passively leave the timing of death to God, have well and truly passed into history. Much of the Christian discussion around end-of-life issues seems unaware of this, or chooses to ignore it.

The dilemma—the law or compassion?

VAD confronts us with a classic ethical dilemma involving an irreconcilable conflict between two important principles—sanctity of human life on the one hand and compassion on the other. In that small proportion of dying people tortured by refractory suffering that palliative care cannot relieve, we are forced to choose one principle over the other. The questions are—which one, and why?

Christians usually frame euthanasia as a sanctity of life issue, based on the law—either Mosaic law ('thou shalt not kill') or natural law (since God is the author of all life, then God alone can end life). Compassion, the overriding consideration for secular proponents of euthanasia, is less of a consideration for Christians; and if it is considered, it is automatically overridden by the principle of the sanctity of life.⁵ This is a curious position for Christians to take for two reasons.

Firstly, Christians are inconsistent (hypocritical, even) by using sanctity of life as an absolute, overriding principle in the cases of euthanasia and abortion, but not applying it as the overriding principle in their attitudes to the many other issues that also kill people (war, poverty, injustice, unemployment, government cut-backs, climate change, alcohol,

2 Kelly & Co. Solicitors Adelaide, 'Children and Issues of Consent', *Health brief: health law*, no. 3 (Sep 1999) reports on the decision of a UK court to override a 15 year-old's refusal to consent to a heart transplant.

3 Helga Kuhse, Peter Singer, Peter Baume, Malcolm Clark and Maurice Rickard, 'End-of-life decisions in Australian medical practice,' *Med J of Aust* 166, no. 4 (17 Feb 1997): 191–196.

4 Kuhse et al., 'End-of-life decisions', 196; Martin Gunderson and David Mayo, 'Restricting physician-assisted death to the terminally ill', *Hastings Center Report* 30, no. 6 (Nov–Dec 2000): 21.

5 'Pro-life' opponents of quick euthanasia have their own exceptions to this when they employ some interesting mental gymnastics to justify slow euthanasia in the form of terminal sedation, double effect, passive euthanasia and switching off life-support machines. For a useful deconstruction of this avoidance of causal responsibility, see: Patrick D. Hopkins, 'Why does removing machines count as "passive" euthanasia?' *Hastings Center Report* 27, no. 3 (May–Jun 1997): 29–37.

motor vehicles, etc).

Secondly, the gospels do not record Jesus saying anything about the sanctity of life, while compassion is a major theme. Furthermore, Jesus, unlike his modern followers, prioritised compassion over the law, both in word and deed,⁶ and was not afraid to offend the theologians and armchair ethicists of his day to do so. In the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus quite specifically chooses the priest and the Levite for damnation because they were more concerned about their purity before the law than in responding to suffering. And 'damnation' is not too strong a term for the consequences of failing to notice suffering and failing to respond with compassion. In case we think Jesus is not being serious about relieving suffering, he spells out the unfortunate eternal consequences for those who look the other way and fail to relieve distress in Luke 10:25–37 and Matthew 25:31–46.

How then is it more Christian (Christ-like) to use the sanctity of life (the law) rather than compassion as the overriding ethical principle in our response to VAD?

And Bonhoeffer?

Elsewhere in this issue Michael Pietsch summarises Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* comments on suicide, where Bonhoeffer takes a natural law approach to oppose most cases of suicide. In spite of using the strong term 'self-murder' for suicide, he (typically for Bonhoeffer) takes a pastoral approach in his *Ethics*, rather than one of prescriptive legalism or judgement.

There are two other aspects of Bonhoeffer's thinking that may be relevant to VAD.

Firstly, in his later prison jottings on 'religionless Christianity', Bonhoeffer moves away from thinking that we expect a powerful God to providentially swoop down like a magical 'deus ex machina' to rescue us from insoluble problems.⁷ His 'religionless Christianity' speaks of a God who reveals Himself through His compassionate weakness on the cross,⁸ who calls His followers to participate in the suffering of Himself and His world,⁹ and who, post-Pentecost, incarnates Himself into His followers so that we participate in the being of Jesus (incarnation, cross and resurrection) and function as His agents in bringing about His will in this broken world, by being here only for others.¹⁰

This presents a much less certain belief that we just sit back and wait for a supernatural God to providentially relieve end-of-life suffering with a 'natural death' (the natural law argument against VAD) and moves towards accepting that God is relying on us as His incarnated agents to compassionately relieve the distress that God places before us either as individuals, church or society.

6 Bonhoeffer wrote: 'For the sake of God and human beings Jesus Christ became a breaker of the law... out of love for God and human beings.' Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Vol. 6, ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 278.

7 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison: The Enlarged Edition*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM, 1979), 281, 341, 361.

8 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 360–361.

9 *Ibid.*, 337, 361–362, 370.

10 *Ibid.*, 361–362, 381.

Secondly, ethics for Bonhoeffer is not devising and following a set of rules. It is not even intending or trying to do good or to be good—this is impossible in a fallen world thoroughly contaminated by original sin, and any attempt to pretend otherwise is delusional self-righteousness. Our lives as disciples united with Jesus Christ are to be guided rather by Jesus' 'law to love God and neighbor'.¹¹ This requires us to discern how the will of God would have us bring our love for God and neighbour into each concrete situation God places us into. When this requires us to disobey the law, as it often does in an imperfect world, we bear responsibility for the guilt of that. Bonhoeffer terms this 'responsible action', 'established in Christ, to bear guilt for the sake of the neighbor', and 'in contrast to any self-righteous action justified by a principle'.¹²

As an example, Bonhoeffer discusses Kant's rules-based ethic that one must always tell the truth even if, for example, the Gestapo comes to one's door and asks, 'Do you have Jews hiding in your roof?'. Bonhoeffer disputes this simple deontology,¹³ as would most Christians.

Extending this line of thought to VAD, Bonhoeffer might caution against a simplistic deontology that says we can resolve the dilemma of refractory end-of-life suffering by simply obeying the law and averting our gaze from the suffering, as the priest and Levite did so well in the parable. Bonhoeffer might say to us that in the choice between being responsible to the law (natural or Mosaic) or to our 'neighbor's concrete distress',¹⁴ we must discern the will of a loving God who calls each of us to be Christ bringing God's love and mercy into a broken and hurting world. Regardless of our choice, we bear the responsibility and guilt for the unavoidable sin. We can choose our sin, but not choose not to sin. No-one walks away from this dilemma with a self-righteous clean slate.

Conclusion

In spite of good palliative care, the distressed cries of those experiencing refractory end-of-life suffering, and their loved ones, still confront the people of God, demanding a response that is consistent with our calling as compassionate and humble disciples of Jesus Christ. May we learn from Bonhoeffer to be less concerned about keeping our purity before the law and more concerned about taking Jesus' radical call seriously, when he calls us to love our neighbour as he has loved us.

Peter Schulz is a retired hospital social worker who has seen too many neighbours suffering, both professionally and personally. He is a member of the Adelaide Bonhoeffer reading group and gratefully acknowledges the work that Pastor Michael Pietsch puts into convening this group and feeding its members with the deep but incomplete thinking of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

11 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 282; cf. Matt 22:36–40; Mk 12:28–34; Lk 10:25–28.

12 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 279–280.

13 *Ibid.*, 279–280. Bonhoeffer actually terms it a 'grotesque conclusion'.

14 *Ibid.*, 279.