

Assisted Dying: Update and What to Do Now

Following its second reading on Friday 29th November 2024, MPs voted 330 to 275 in favour of Kim Leadbeater's bill – the draft Terminally Ill Adults (End of life) Bill – to legalise assisted suicide for people who have six months left to live, and who have mental capacity to make a choice. There was a majority of 55, with 50 MPs abstaining. Many Christians have been dismayed at this outcome. Danny Webster, director of advocacy for the Evangelical Alliance, said he was “deeply disappointed”...

‘This is the biggest change to how our society treats life in many years. In recent weeks the Evangelical alliance has stood alongside other faith groups, disability groups, medics and lawyers and many who have spoken out and urged their MP to reject the bill. More than 1,200 Christian leaders joined a letter to MPs opposing the bill.

‘If eventually passed this bill will normalise suicide in our society as a positive option, it will place the most vulnerable at risk of abuse and coercion. In the coming months we will continue to work unabated to ensure it does not become law.’¹

Of primary importance. Remove suffering but not the sufferer

John Wyatt is professor of Ethics and Perinatology at University College London. He writes about abortion and euthanasia in *Matters of Life and Death*.² He addresses the challenge posed by ‘mercy killing’: “Isn’t the deliberate ending of human life a way to protect an individual from suffering?” and answers with these words: “No. Biblical thought always draws a line between removing *suffering* and removing *the sufferer*.”³

The Christian is fundamentally opposed to assisted suicide (where someone else prepares a lethal cocktail for you to take) and euthanasia (where someone else takes your life directly). And this is of primary importance. These are forms of murder that have been forbidden by God. Wyatt cites Genesis: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.” (Gen 9:6). Here the intentional destruction of innocent human life is forbidden. Further it is a desecration of God’s image, “God’s masterpiece”.⁴ Wyatt states,

‘This is why orthodox Christian thought has always been opposed, not only to homicide, the taking of another life, but also to suicide. The deliberate destruction of one’s own life, is also a desecration of God’s image.’⁵

There was little time given to such a crucial debate. Only five hours, compared to 200 hours for the Fox hunting bill! The time was mostly spent discussing more *secondary matters*:

Secondary Matters

¹ Text taken from <https://www.e-n.org.uk/uk-news/assisted-suicide-vote-evangelical-reactions/>

² John Wyatt, *Matters of Life and Death* [LICC London Lectures] IVP 1998, rev edn 2009.

³ Wyatt, 216.

⁴ Wyatt, 216.

⁵ Wyatt, ???

The *painful-death argument* was deceitfully embellished. The reality?

‘Specialists say that, with appropriate expertise, pain can be completely abolished or dramatically ameliorated in over 95% of cases. In fact, physical pain in terminal illness is rarely a major problem for carers today. The problem pain is spiritual pain, emotional pain, relational pain...’⁶

As with fears of an undignified death, the latter two categories are addressed more through human presence: family members and others who can be there for the person in a hospice setting or at home. *The fear of death itself* can only be met by the Christian Gospel with the prospect of eternal life in Christ: the assured hope granted us through Christ’s resurrection being the promise of our own for all who have put their faith in him.

The debate also revolved around *safeguards and how safe they would be*. My own MP responded to my letter. His argument maintained, in my view, a naïve faith that British safeguards would avoid the ‘slippery slope’ of an ever-widening criterion for those who qualified to be killed. This is despite growing evidence of this in countries that have already passed such legislation.⁷

To the argument based on personal autonomy, “I have a right to assisted suicide” Wyatt responds:

‘We are free to act and choose as responsible moral agents who are accountable to one another, and ultimately accountable to God. But there are God given limits to our freedom as moral agents. The limits are part of the hidden moral order of the creation, the moral warp and woof of reality. And one of these limits which we must not transgress is to choose to destroy my own life or the life of another.’⁸

Gilbert Meilaender adds,

‘Within the story of my life I have the relative freedom of a creature, but it is not simply my life to do with as I please... Suicide...expresses a desire to be free and not also finite – a desire to be more like the Creator than creature.’⁹

The premise that the individual has an autonomy and right to make decisions about their own death can never be taken as an absolute principle because, we hope, no sane person would condone another person taking their own life at any time of their life for whatever reason they wish. We know that that would be an evil.

I say these issues are *secondary matters* for Christians because the over-riding belief, as I stated earlier, is that assisted suicide and euthanasia are *forms of murder* (‘remove suffering but not the sufferer’). These have been forbidden by God. This truth *trumps* all other reasons.

⁶ Wyatt, 130.

⁷ See my article “Assisted Dying (Euthanasia)” at <http://www.evangelicalbaptist.uk/assisted-dying/>.

⁸ Wyatt, 217.

⁹ Gilbert C. Meilaender, *Bioethics. A Primer for Christians* (Grand Rapids 2005, fourth edn 2020), 57.

For those who have no Christian faith, there is a deep intuition that these are forms of murder. God's moral law presses in on all people (John 1:4,5,9; Romans 2:14,15), but since there is a natural, sinful rebellion in human hearts, human beings believe they can decide such questions according to their own criterion. However, the debate did reveal the understanding that we are actually *killing people* and the accompanying gravity associated with this, and is well described by Brendan O'Neill, chief political writer for *Spiked*:

'For me, the grimmest thing about today's "assisted dying" debate in the House of Commons was when MPs emitted an audible groan upon hearing about Canada's state-sanctioned killing of the wretched. It was the Conservative MP Danny Kruger who had the temerity to mention these unfortunates put to death by their own government. He referred to "medics" in Canada, who are "specialists in assisted death", who "personally kill hundreds of patients a year". A collective whine shook the chamber as MPs were confronted with the truth of what they were voting for: the right of state-approved bodies to slay certain members of the public. "If honourable members have a difficulty with the language", Kruger shot back, "then I wonder what they're doing here."

'The groan spoke volumes. With their eye-rolling, our lawmakers exposed how utterly out of touch they are with the strife of the sick and poor who have indeed been killed – yes, *killed* – in Canada. They have so uncritically bought into the shadowy, euphemistic lingo about a "right to die" that they appear to have forgotten that it involves the literal killing of a person on the basis that his or her life, in the state's eyes, is miserable and ludicrous. Under Canada's regime of death, this has included killing people who are not even terminally ill but who simply have "unmet social needs", such as a lack of housing or of future prospects.'¹⁰

What to do now

Ciaran Kelly, Director of the Christian Institute, in a statement said

'...the fight is not over. We know that the more people know about assisted suicide the less they like it. Those MPs who supported the bill but have concerns about its practical implications must now take time to scrutinise it properly. They will find the promised safeguards are nothing more than a mirage. They will then have further opportunity to vote against the bill before it clears the Commons. If it does go to the House of Lords, it is by no means guaranteed to pass there.

'We urge Christians to keep on praying and to be ready to approach their MPs again over the coming months. This is a life and death issue. Now is not the time to give up. There is still a long way to go before the bill is made law. It will not return to Parliament until April 2025. MPs will have the chance to vote on the bill twice more, including on any new amendments and then also at a third reading, before it proceeds to the House of Lords.'¹¹

¹⁰ www.spiked-online.com/2024/11/29/this-is-a-truly-dark-day-for-our-nation/ .

¹¹ <https://www.e-n.org.uk/uk-news/assisted-suicide-vote-evangelical-reactions/>.

Many remain committed to defeating the bill. According to MP Danny Kruger, a lot of MPs only supported the second reading because they want to see the bill improved in committee. If their concerns are not addressed, they will vote it down. In the light of Kelly's comments we have time to write to our MPs again, and we must pray that the bill is defeated by its third reading. We should also be stressing to our church families the importance of the matter and praying that if this bill were to be passed, that they resist the temptation to break God's command. His commands are always for our genuine good and welfare, because He loves us.

Prayer

Here is a *prayer* I wrote for last Sunday morning's service, that you would be welcome to use or adapt as you see fit:

'O Lord we lament before you that Parliament chose to endorse the assisted suicide bill on Friday. Your command is clear, 'Do not murder' and this includes not murdering ourselves through the assistance of others. We pray this bill will still not make it to the statute books.

'We pray that vulnerable people will resist the temptation to break your command. We pray that such will be given excellent palliative care to ease them of any pain. We pray they will discover assured hope of resurrection to eternal life through the Christian Gospel.

'Thank you for the expertise you have given doctors to aid us. Protect us from evil. Have mercy on us. Amen!'