

A Good Death?

The Euthanasia Debate

What does it mean to 'die well'? How we answer this question reveals a lot about what we believe. The issue of euthanasia raises important questions about autonomy, healthcare, suffering and the meaning of life itself. The debate isn't theoretical, it's deeply personal—the stakes are high. To effectively engage with this issue, we must understand our own perspective and the perspectives of others.

Terminology

Euthanasia

This word is derived from Greek, and literally means 'good death'. Historically, this term has been used to refer to any action which ends someone's life, in order to relieve pain and suffering. A variety of practices fall under this definition.

Active Euthanasia

This term refers to an action which is intended to end someone's life. The action could be initiated by either the patient or a physician. For instance, giving a patient a lethal injection would be considered 'active' euthanasia. In the past, this has been called 'mercy killing'.

Passive Euthanasia

This concept is best understood as '*allowing someone to die*'. Examples of 'passive' euthanasia include ceasing chemotherapy or taking a patient off a ventilator. We think there are very important differences between 'active' and 'passive' euthanasia. In fact, we do not consider 'passive' euthanasia to be euthanasia at all, because it often has different motivations. That is not to say that 'allowing someone to die' is always ethically straightforward, but simply that it is a different issue to 'active euthanasia'.

Physician Assisted Suicide (PAS) / Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD)

These are key terms for the current debate and the focus of this resource. PAS/VAD involves a doctor prescribing the patient a drug which will end their life. The respective use of 'suicide' and

‘voluntary’ emphasises that the action is taken by the patient. At the current moment, VAD seems to be the preferred term.

Palliative Care

Palliative care supports quality of life for someone with a terminal illness. It is focussed on a patient’s holistic needs, as well as the needs of their family. It includes pain management and emotional, spiritual, psychological and social support. Palliative care is available at any stage of illness. Euthanasia and palliative care are very different. Palliative care often involves pain relief and sometimes even the difficult decision to cease treatment. Neither of these issues should be confused with VAD. Christians must advocate for good palliative care, as a viable alternative to legalised euthanasia.

What Lies Behind the Debate?

Underlying beliefs	The VAD Position	A Christian Perspective
Death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Death is terrible. • Death has no intrinsic meaning. • Death is made worse because we are unable to control it. Choosing when and how you die makes facing death better. • A painful and prolonged death is undignified. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Death is terrible. • Death has meaning—there is both <i>horror</i> and <i>hope</i>. • Even death is under God’s sovereignty. Only He is truly in control. • A painful and long death does not change a person’s dignity or God-given identity.
Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life’s meaning is found in pleasure and productivity. • Conditions which negate these may render life unliveable. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life’s meaning is found in relationship with God and others. • Every human life is created and sustained by God, and carries His image. • This meaning does not depend on pleasure or productivity.

Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You are the ultimate and only true authority over your life. Self-determination is a fundamental human right and the law should not impede on it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> God is the ultimate and only true authority over your life. Self-determination is an important part of being human, and the law should protect this right to the appropriate extent. However, as communities as individuals, we also need the law to protect us from exercising our self-determination in harmful ways.
Pain & Suffering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pain and suffering are terrible. They have no intrinsic meaning. They should be avoided at all costs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pain and suffering are terrible. There is meaning in pain and suffering. They are symptoms of a world which is not in right relationship with God. It is good and wise to avoid pain and suffering, where possible. However, God can also use these experiences to shape us and serve others.
Healthcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The purpose of healthcare is to provide for my individual needs and uphold my autonomy. Healthcare providers should aim to relieve pain and suffering, at all costs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The purpose of healthcare is to uphold life and promote flourishing for the whole community. The work of a healthcare provider is in direct opposition to death. They should not engage in practices which aim to end someone's life. Healthcare providers should ease suffering wherever possible, and care for a patient's physical, emotional and spiritual needs.

Think & Pray

- What does the Bible say about death? Consider the horror and the hope.
- Can a death ever be 'good'? What might that look like?

- Historically, Christians have played a crucial role in establishing palliative care practices. Why do you think this is?
- What is the difference between 'allowing someone to die' and intentionally ending a life?
- If someone in your family were facing a terrible prognosis, how would you help them think through the issue of euthanasia?