

“What are the Criteria for Euthanasia?”

I have a co-worker who is a fellow Christian and we are in a dispute over the issue of euthanasia. We have agreed to let you settle this dispute.

I contend that euthanasia is only considered to be “euthanasia” when there is a deliberate attempt to end a person’s life using some medical tool that speeds up the timeframe of a natural death, i.e. lethal injection. He contends that removing life support from a patient should also be considered euthanasia. I argue that removing life support allows for a natural death according to God’s timeframe. He argues that if a patient does not receive all that medical science offers to prolong life, then that is in effect killing this patient according to our own timeframe, since it is God who gives us the scientific knowledge to have access to these life support systems. He has an interesting point, but I simply don’t agree with him and can’t find anything in the scriptures that affirm either argument. Can you help us?

Regarding withholding treatment of a dying patient, you are both right depending on the circumstances. When a patient is truly and imminently dying (and we can know this since certain bodily functions can begin to irreversibly shut down such as the ability to eliminate fluids), continuing normal body maintenance such as food and water can actually increase the patient’s discomfort without altering their chances for survival. This is little more than torture for no intended purpose. Letting nature take its course and relieving as much discomfort and pain as possible is a completely humane and biblical course of action. Some may argue that prolonging life in this instance may allow God an opportunity to work a miraculous healing. We simply have to ask ourselves, How much time does God really need? If He is sovereign, then He will

act in His timeframe, not ours.

However, if the person has a terminal illness but the acute death process has not yet begun and there are normal measures that offer hope and comfort without adding an unnecessary burden, then these measures ought to be pursued. But I must emphasize that this is a tricky judgement call. An Alzheimer's patient is dying and will die relatively soon, but when do normal measures become more of a burden than a help? In Joni Eareckson Tada's 1992 book, *When Is It Right to Die?*, she tells of her father who suffered a series of strokes and could no longer expel waste fluids. They chose to remove the IV (which would simply have bloated his body and not nourished it) and simply soothe his mouth and lips with ice chips as his body died. However, she strongly insists that patients in a Permanently Vegetative State (PVS) are severely disabled but not dying, and they deserve whatever care we can give them.

These decisions will always require a host of opinions—medical, familial, and pastoral—to arrive at the best course for this individual patient. Hard and fast rules will lead to abuses which is one of the reasons why pro-euthanasia laws are always a bad idea. They simply can't cover all the possible contingencies, now or in the future. Regulations will be impossible to write and to enforce.

Respectfully,

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