End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill

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Thank you for giving us the opportunity to comment on the End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill during this Consultation period.

The End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill raises an important question for Christians: Is it right or wrong for us to end our own life or to participate in ending another human being’s life? In our morally subjective society there is a view expressed that if we or another human being is suffering or finds their life “intolerable” as the result of disease then suicide or assisted suicide should be allowed.

In answering this question, we need to ask if there are rules to guide us for such an important ethical question as this. For both the Jew and the Christian there is guidance in the Five Books of Moses which are found in both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. These Five Books of Moses have been the foundation of our Justice system in the UK and in fact have been a civilizing influence in our Western society as we know it today. No other piece of literature, book or previous civilization has made such an important contribution to our society in this country as the Bible. The Bible not only tells us how to relate to God but also gives us clear, unmistakeable guidance in relating to our fellow human beings and the guidance is contained in the Ten Commandments.

What is the Bible’s guidance on this question? In the second book of the Bible the sixth commandment says “Thou shalt not kill.”¹ This statement is repeated in the fifth book of the Bible.² This statement tells us in clear, unequivocal language that we have no right to either end our own or another human being’s life. For over three thousand years this has been one of the guiding rules in our relationship with others and nowhere in the Bible is there an exception to this rule. This means that the condition stipulated in the End of Life Assistance Bill i.e. “finds life intolerable” cannot be accepted as justification for either ending one’s own or another human being’s life. This does not mean that we are not allowed to fight for our country in a just war. Nor does it mean that we are against the administration of a pain relieving drug to a terminally ill patient that may end the Patient’s life provided that the patient’s family are aware of this. The other major religions of the world give similar guidance on this issue.

Underpinning this commandment “Thou shall not kill” is the Biblical concept that human life is a gift from God. Job says “the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”³ This concept is first encountered in the first chapter of the first book of the Bible: “and God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness;”⁴ It is this transcendent part of humans that gives us our God given dignity and our essential difference from the rest of God’s creation. Our life is God’s gift to us and
therefore we have no right to either end our own life or someone else’s prematurely.

Some take the view that to help end the life of people who are suffering or terminally ill is a “mercy killing.” The meaning of mercy is “compassion or forgiveness shown towards someone whom it is within one’s power to punish or harm.” Implicit in the word mercy is the concept of sparing life and one of the physician’s basic rules “Do no harm”. For Christians being merciful would involve “Loving our neighbour as ourselves” and so our approach to the suffering and terminally ill would be to care for them in a loving way that would give them dignity at the end of their days. So the term “mercy killing” contains an inherent contradiction in terms which is alien to any understanding of the Bible or the ethical guidance it gives in our relationships with other human beings.

Others take the view that if we are allowed to “put our pets down” then we should be allowed to do the same to humans who are suffering or are terminally ill. This view makes the false assumption that we are no different from animals. Although we must treat animals with compassion as they are also God’s creation, humans have much greater intelligence than animals, are able to tell others the intensity of their suffering and as we have seen above have within them a God made transcendence which makes humans completely different from animals. We must therefore treat human beings differently to animals and have a great respect for human life.

The Bible teaches Christians to have a reverence for human life and to care for those who are suffering and who may be terminally ill. In addition to all the resources that modern medicine brings to these situations we must also care for them with a tenderness and love that will give them dignity and respect at the end of their days.

We, as a Church, would respectfully but firmly advise that to abandon the Biblical guidance given in the sixth commandment “Thou shalt not kill” which has been our guide for over three thousand years would be a serious error of judgement and would not serve our nation well. However, we are greatly encouraged by the plans to increase the provision of Hospice facilities in Scotland and suggest that this provision would be much more beneficial for our people than putting this Bill on the Statute Book.

References
1. Exodus chapter 20 verse 13
2. Deuteronomy chapter 5 verse 17
3. Job chapter 1 verse 21
4. Genesis chapter 1 verse 26
5. New Oxford Dictionary of English page 1158
6. Gospel of Matthew chapter 22 verse 39
7. www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/10/01091608/0

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