

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### *The Growing Acceptance of Euthanasia*

In Western Europe euthanasia is increasingly easy and ethically acceptable. Naftali Bendavid recently reported on the case of Belgium twins, Marc and Eddy Verbesssem, who were identical deaf twins who had a genetic disorder that was also making them blind. After a wrenching ordeal that involved legal and medical difficulties, Marc and Eddy, on 14 December 2012, went to a Brussels hospital, said goodbye to their family, lay down in adjoining beds, received lethal injections and were gone. They died under the auspices of Belgium's euthanasia law, which was adopted in 2002, with the goal of helping incurably ill patients escape "unbearable physical or mental suffering." Euthanasia now counts for about 1% of all deaths in Belgium. (The Netherlands and Luxembourg have similar laws.) The Belgium parliament is now considering expanding its euthanasia law to include gravely ill teenagers, if their parents agree with the decision. Another bill would approve early Alzheimer's disease patients, who could have their life ended when a doctor concludes "they no longer are interacting with the outside world." Many Europeans view euthanasia as a highly compassionate option that allows individuals to control their fate and many now see it as a human right. In the US, currently four states permit assisted suicide—Oregon, Washington, Montana and Vermont. In all cases, the patient, not the doctor, administers the lethal dose. In the US there is another euthanasia option being promoted by a group called Final Exit Network, a New Jersey-based nonprofit that advertises an "exit bag"—a plastic hood that fits over the head and is fed by helium, resulting in a quick death. For those who adhere to an innate value of life ethic, all of this is quite troubling. How should we think about such things? Should Christians embrace euthanasia as advocated by Belgium or the US group, Final Exit Network? A few thoughts:

- **A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF DEATH AND LIFE:** A believer in Jesus Christ has a very different view of death than one who is not. Death in Scripture is clearly the judgment of God for sin. God told Adam that if he ate of the tree in the garden, he would die. When he and Eve ate, they both eventually experienced physical death (see narrative in Genesis 2 and 3). But the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ dealt the death-blow to sin and rendered death inoperative in the believer's life. Because Jesus conquered death through His resurrection, the believer need not fear death. Although that person may die physically (the soul separated from the body), it is not permanent because of the promised resurrection. Hence, Paul can write in 1 Corinthians 15:54-55, "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" Thus, the believer in Jesus Christ should face death with tension. Paul gives us a window into this tension when he writes, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Death means to be with Jesus and to have all the daily struggles, both physical and spiritual, over. Although inexplicable, death is the door Christians go through to be with Christ. There is no other way, barring Christ's return for his church, for the believer to be with Christ. There is, therefore, the constant pull of heaven matched by the constant pull to remain and serve the Lord on earth. Death remains

in the sovereign hand of God and when it comes the believer, although anxious and perhaps frightened, there is comfort in the words of Scripture, “To be absent from the body, is to be present with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8).

- Second, the Bible teaches that every person, believer and unbeliever, is inherently dignified and worthy of respect. It is always proper and ethically right to fight for life, because men and women are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27). Human life is sacred (Genesis 9:1-6) and no one should be demeaned or cursed (James 3:9-10). To treat a human, who bears God’s image, in an undignified manner, to wantonly destroy life or to assume the position of authority over the life and death of another human, is to step outside of God’s revelation. The Bible affirms the intrinsic worth and equal value of every human life regardless of its stage or condition. In a word, this is the Judeo-Christian view of life. What are some implications of this high view of life?

1. It seems logical that life is so valuable it should be terminated only when highly unusual considerations dictate an exception. Dr. Jack Kevorkian, who spent 10 years in a Michigan prison for practicing euthanasia, had helped over 100 people commit suicide, some of whom were suffering from clinical depression. It is difficult to justify such actions from Scripture. Such practices cheapen life; treat a human as of little value and with no dignity. In short, to allow widespread euthanasia is to foster a culture of death.
2. Another implication of the Judeo-Christian view of life is that personhood is defined in biological terms. I believe that life begins at conception. Therefore, “personhood” is not defined according to I.Q., a sense of the future, a capacity to relate to other humans or any other such criteria. The point is that God creates the life, defines its beginning as conception and sustains the life. Humans who believe His Word will maintain the same view and always fight for life. To end life in a pre-meditated manner, as does Dr. Kevorkian or as is legitimized in doctor-assisted suicide, violates the Bible’s high view of life.
3. Over the last several decades in western civilization, especially in medicine but through the entire culture, a new ethic is replacing the Judeo-Christian ethic articulated above--the “quality of life” ethic. This ethic places relative, rather than absolute, value on human beings. This new “quality of life” ethic is frightening. Rejecting any claim to ethical absolutes, this ethic flees to subjective criteria to define life’s value and ends up justifying both euthanasia and infanticide. It violates all aspects of life’s value as defined by the image of God concept and places humans in the seat of the sovereign God. Using subjective criteria, the quality of life ethic empowers other humans to decide who lives and who dies. As a Christian, it is impossible to defend this ethic.

End-of-life decisions are difficult and often emotionally wrenching. Whatever situations we face as Christians, we must affirm the infinite value of life and seek to preserve its dignity, value and worth. May God give us the grace to do so.

See Naftali Bendavid in the *Wall Street Journal* (19 June 2012) and James P. Eckman, *Biblical Ethics*, pp. 29-33.