

Death with Dignity

By Rev. Dr. James I. Lamb



“Death with dignity is in my rusty van,” said physician-assisted suicide (PAS) advocate Jack Kevoorkian, who helped people kill themselves in his van. From both societal and Christian perspectives, equating PAS and dignity is dangerous.

Christian Perspective

God is the author of life and He alone possess the authority to end life. As long as He gives life, He gives life value and purpose. Consider these spiritual dangers.

- **Puts us in charge of life and death.** — *The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD* (Job 1:21b).
- **Displays a lack of trust and dependence on God.** — *Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding* (Proverbs 3:5).
- **Interrupts the blessings God works through suffering.**
God’s power is displayed in weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:9)
He uses suffering to discipline us in love. (Hebrews 12:5–10)
He uses suffering to strengthen faith. (James 1:2–3)
God’s comfort in suffering enables us to comfort others. (2 Corinthians 1:3–4)
We know God works good in suffering because of the ultimate good that came from Christ’s suffering on the cross. (Romans 8:32)
- **Keeps us from being Jesus by serving others.** (John 13:14)
- **Keeps others from being Jesus to us.** (Matthew 25:30)
When we are “the least,” when we allow others to serve us, we are like Jesus.

Christian Tension

We live in the tension Paul describes in Philippians 1: *I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account* (verses 23–24). The tension is between the “far better” of being with Christ and the “more necessary” of remaining. We can desire our desperately ill mom be with Christ. We must not send her to be with Him. As long as God gives mom life, it is “more necessary,” according to God’s purpose, for her to remain.

Societal Perspective

Seven states and the District of Columbia have legalized PAS. Consider these dangers.

- **Fails to consider that depression is treatable.**
- **Becomes the least expensive “treatment” for insurance companies.**
- **Increases suicides in general in states where legal*.**
- **Equates killing with caring.**
- **Enables increase in elder abuse** (e.g., pressuring grandma to take the deadly poison to get her inheritance)
- **Continues to erode the value and dignity of human life.**
- **Becomes the first step onto a dangerously slippery slope.** Countries that legalized PAS moved from PAS to euthanasia (where someone else administers the poison); from euthanasia for physical illness to euthanasia for psychological distress; from voluntary euthanasia to involuntary. Minors and children can now be euthanized in these countries.

True Death with Dignity

Maggie Karner, the former director of LCMS Life Ministries, died of a brain tumor in September 2015. (See *LWQ* Summer 2017.) I close with quotes from this friend and colleague who understood true death with dignity.

“As a Christian with a Savior who loves me dearly and who has redeemed me from a dying world, I have a higher calling. God wants me to be comfortable in my dependence on Him and others, to live with Him in peace and comfort no matter what comes my way.

“As for my cancer journey, circumstances out of my control are not the worst thing that can happen to me. The worst thing would be losing faith, refusing to trust in God’s purpose in my life, and trying to grab that control myself.

“I want my girls to learn selflessness and servanthood as they care for me.

“[God] truly understands our sorrows and feelings of helplessness. I want my kids to know that Christ’s resurrection from that borrowed grave confirms that death could not hold Him, and it cannot hold me either — a baptized child of God!” *Q*

*How Does Legalization of Physician-Assisted Suicide Affect Rates of Suicide? *Southern Medical Journal* Volume: 108 Issue: 10 October, 2015, Pp 509-604