

CONVERSATIONS

SANCTITY OF LIFE: Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID) Series 3, Paper 4

WHAT IS THE FAITHFUL RESPONSE TO EUTHANASIA & ASSISTED SUICIDE?

A growing number of Canadians are asking their medical providers to end their lives. Originally intended for people suffering serious illness and close to death, Bill C-14, passed in 2016, made it legal for a medical professional either to end a patient's life (euthanasia) or to provide aid for people to end their own lives (assisted suicide). In 2021, however, Bill C-7 expanded access to medical assistance in dying (MAID) to include people not facing a foreseeable death, including those suffering from chronic or mental illness.

Canada has quickly become a world leader in providing easy access to assisted suicide. Although polling shows most Canadians support some form of MAID, many people feel MAID has gone too far and are pushing back. Some are concerned vulnerable people (the elderly, people with disabilities, mental illness, lower income, etc.) are at higher risk of being pressured to take MAID as it becomes an easier solution than the effort and expense of helping people in their suffering through social supports and other means. Christians have a responsibility to understand what MAID is and whether it's proper for believers to request, provide or support MAID.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Half of Canadians identify as atheists, undecided, spiritual-but-not-religious, or no religious affiliation. This arises from a long history of shifting views about what it means to be human. Prior to the 1500's it was normal to see humans as creatures of God, under God's authority to obey him and to care for one another. However, during a time called "The Enlightenment" humans began to see themselves without responsibility to God. People now largely seek to "write their own story," which includes making choices about how they want to live and how they want to die, without regard for God or a higher truth outside human reason, or personal desire. As Christians, however, our beliefs and actions must be directed by the Bible.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH?

Nowhere does the Bible use the words euthanasia or suicide, but it does address God's command against ending human life and why that matters.

1. God's Command: You Shall Not Murder

"You shall not murder" (Ex 20:13; Deut 5:17) is God's moral will. In the New Testament, Jesus upholds this (Matt 5:21-22) and so does the Apostle Paul (Rom 13:19; 1 Timothy 1:9). John announces that "no murderer has eternal life residing in him" (1 John 3:15). Someone might ask: Didn't God sometimes allow ending human life? God commanded the Canaanites be eradicated (Deut 7:1-2; 20:16-18) and even fellow Israelites be killed (e.g., Achan and his family – Joshua 7) in response to sin. Moreover, in the New Testament, rulers were given God's authority to kill by the sword (Rom 13:4). Might this not open the door for our rulers to allow MAID? In all these biblical examples, ending human life was only permitted as part of God's judgment against sin. Therefore, unless we believe medical professionals are carrying out God's judgment against people, then MAID is not an "exception" to the command, "you shall not murder."

2. God's Creature: The Divine Image Bearer

A "thou shalt not," begs the question, "why not?" First, God created male and the female in His image (Gen 1:26-27). Second, humans were created by God to represent Him in this world (2 Cor 5:20, Eph 2:10, Matt 5:14). So, to kill a human

MAID IN CANADA

Numbers at a glance in 2021

10,065

*deaths by MAID in 2021
(up five-fold from 2017)*

20-30%

*of Canadians have access to
palliative care programs*

61.5%

*of MAID recipients listing cancer as
the main pre-condition*

86.3%

*of MAID recipients listed "Loss of
ability to engage in meaningful
activities" as the main nature of
their suffering (57.6%
listed concern about inadequate
pain control)*

68.2%

*proportion of time family physicians
were called to provide MAID (those
in palliative medicine were at 8.6%)*

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is to kill a representative of God. It is because humans have this special role that Scripture strictly forbids making graven images of God (Ex 20:4-6; Deut 4:16-18). Murder is also a failure to love one's neighbour who is also created in the likeness of God (James 3:9). Paul lists many commandments, including "You shall not murder," that are summed up by "love your neighbour" (Rom 13:9-10).

3. God as Creator, Lord and Judge

So, who is this God that we represent? Scripture teaches that the God who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit is the same God who brought creation into existence and who continues to sustain and rule over creation and its creatures. The Bible repeatedly calls God "the living God" (Joshua 3:10; Dan 6:26; Jer 10:10; Matt 16:16; John 6:57; Heb 3:12). It is God alone who gives life but it is also God alone who takes life. As Deuteronomy 32:39 puts it, "... There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand." Ending a person's life, even with good intention to end suffering, is wrong

because only God can do that. To kill another without divine permission is to stand in God's place or to "be like God," to use the language of the Tempter (Gen 3:5).

What About Suffering?

MAID supporters argue it's a compassionate way to end suffering. But in Scripture hastening death to end suffering was never done or taught by Jesus or His apostles. They often healed people by the Holy Spirit, and sometimes even brought them back to life. So how should we show loving compassion to those who suffer? Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan answers this. The Good Samaritan found a man "half-dead" (Luke 10:30)— a fair representation of those suffering where death is foreseeable — and yet did not end the man's suffering through "mercy killing." Instead, the Samaritan "had compassion on him" (10:33), "bound his wounds, pouring in oil and wine" and paid to take care of him (10:34-35). He did not bring an efficient end to the man's suffering,

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HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?

There are many reasons MAID matters to the church, especially as pastors are called for end-of-life spiritual support. Here are five ways we might respond:

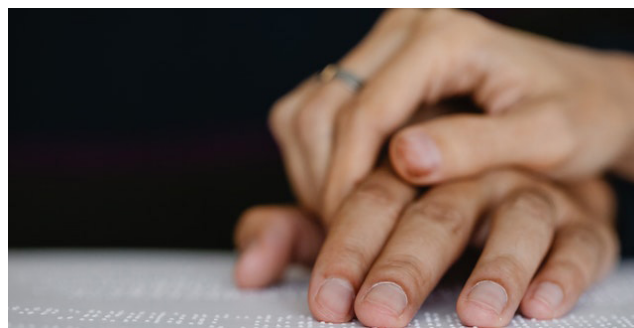
Pray: Nobody is unable to pray. We can pray for those suffering, for medical professionals, for law makers and politicians, and for families, caregivers and pastors working with people contemplating MAID.

Teach: Local church leaders should teach about life and death issues and how God helps and comforts the suffering. As all Christians can expect to suffer at some point (Phil 1:29; 1 Pet 5:10) children, youth and adults need to see care for life modelled by those in spiritual leadership and by seniors who will be called in God's timing to enter a journey of dying which often includes suffering.

Prepare: It's hard but we all should prepare for our own or our loved ones' deaths. Today many people avoid talking about death or what will happen after. But the time to make life and death decisions is before, not during crises. Parents and grandparents need to resolve in their hearts and before God their intentions in their last days and make clear to family before then that they won't request MAID. Here wills, powers of attorney, and living wills become witnesses to our faith that God will carry us through even the darkest valley of the shadow of death.

Palliative care: Palliative care provides relief from pain. Though it does not meet all the concerns of those who favour MAID to completely end suffering, it is a comfort to those who fear unmanageable suffering that this medical discipline has advanced significantly. Christians should call for greater access to palliative care, especially since many Canadians still don't have it. Supporting palliative care and being present are just some ways Christians can show compassion, like Jesus did, for the suffering. These are huge opportunities for Christian volunteerism and ministry.

Political advocacy: MAID impacts many layers of law and policy. As individuals, we can write or meet our local leaders, serve on town councils or local hospital and hospice boards, volunteer or work with provincial and federal politicians, or simply listen to diverse views so we can be fully educated and have meaningful conversations that represent God's will on matters of life and death.



FURTHER READING

Euthanasia and Palliative Care: A Guide for Canadians. www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/Resources/Documents/Euthanasia-and-Palliative-Care-Study-Guide

Behind the Curtain of Assisted Dying, by David Guretzki
www.faithtoday.ca/Magazines/2020-May-Jun/Behind-The-Curtain-Of-Assisted-Dying

Navigating Medical Assistance in Dying, by Patricia Paddey
www.faithtoday.ca/Magazines/2022-May-Jun/Navigating-Medical-Assistance-in-Dying

A Guide to Discussing Assisted Suicide by Blaise Alleyne & Jonathan Van Maren

When Is it Right to Die? A Comforting and Surprising Look at Death and Dying, by Joni Eareckson Tada