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Suffering Redeemed: A Reformed Argument Against Physician Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia

by Steven D. Aguzzi

Introduction to the Debate and Basic Argument

The nature of the debate between those who support and those who reject euthanasia and physician assisted suicide is complex at almost every level, and thus care must be given to define terms adequately and make proper distinctions among end-of-life circumstances. For the purposes of this essay, *physician assisted suicide* (PAS) will be defined as that moment when “a doctor, acting on a patient’s request, provides that person with the means to end his or her life, often to relieve the person’s pain and suffering. The physician provides the means, but the final act is the patient’s.”¹ *Euthanasia*,² a more difficult term to define because it takes many forms, may be divided into the following: *voluntary euthanasia* occurs when a non-coerced, competent, and informed patient asks another individual to end his or her life; *involuntary euthanasia* involves the killing of a competent and informed individual against his or her will and request; *nonvoluntary euthanasia* happens when a person without proper mental faculties is killed; *passive euthanasia* is the process of withdrawing or withholding the treatment of a patient with the result being death—this is contrasted with the direct ending of life in *active euthanasia*.³ In this essay, the term at the heart of the debate, *euthanasia*, will refer to voluntary, active euthanasia only—involuntary and nonvoluntary forms

will simply be considered murder and not be treated in the text, and passive euthanasia will not be considered killing, but “allowing to die.”⁴ Because both PAS and euthanasia as defined above involve a voluntary, informed, competent decision for actively ending the life of a patient with that patient’s consent and full cooperation, the only distinction concerns who it is that directly participates in the ending of life: the physician at the patient’s request, or the patient himself.

Since this essay will argue on the basis of a Reformed theological approach against engaging in the act of PAS and euthanasia, a certain theological distinction must be made. I want to make a distinction between the term *suffering*⁵ as a general category of description in terms of quality of life, and what I would call *suffering unto death*, which I define as suffering the knowledge and completion of an approaching death without exercising the freedom to prematurely and actively end it by means of self-inflicted acts or acts deliberately authorized for

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