



The Death of Terri Schiavo-- Years Later

Principled Thinking & Christian Perspectives on Euthanasia and the End of Life

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One Year Later

Friday March 31, 2006 marks the one year anniversary since the tragic death of Terri Schiavo. I vividly remember this time last year because I was fully engaged in the debate over and fight for her life. After coming home one day and discussing this issue, I realized that my own family was not thinking about end of life issues in a principled way. That realization provoked me to write an article to help others understand what euthanasia is and why it is morally wrong. Distributed widely across the country, that article thrust me into the national spotlight as one of the many spokespersons speaking out for Terry's life. Because many of our supporters found the article helpful, we are redistributing this adaptation.

Personal Family Experiences

Only two weeks after Terri Schiavo died, my own mother passed away on April 14, 2005. Following a stroke, she helplessly laid in a nursing home bed for six months suffering with physical disabilities very similar to the ones that Terri experienced. My mother was fed by a feeding tube. Unable to talk, she barely mouthed sounds. And we were unsure how aware she was as mom could only move her head and squeeze her left hand. It was a surreal experience to be fighting for Schiavo's life on national cable television one day and then to visit my mom's bedside to read her the Bible and hold her hand the next day. While this personal experience only reinforced my convictions on the value and dignity of human life, for many others, personal experiences cloud their judgment and tempt them to view the issue subjectively and ignore greater ethical principles.

Euthanasia

The word "Euthanasia" is a Greek word and literally means "good death." It involves something one does or fails to do which is intended to cause death of a person with the motivation of helping someone avoid pain by ending their life. Sometimes called "mercy killing," this practice involves ending the life of a human being prematurely before the time of their natural death. Euthanasia is the moral equivalent of abortion at the other end of life.

The Pro-Life Spectrum

Life is a continuum from conception to natural death. Terri's case was not a right to die case. Hers was a right to life case. At the time, Terri was living, not dying. There is no "right to die" under the constitution or under any moral claim. Life is a gift given by God and should only be taken by God or his naturally ordained process of death. As obvious as it may seem, one needs to look no further than the Ten Commandments for the timeless and controlling moral principle to guide our perspective on so called mercy killing: "Thou shall not kill."

Quality of Life

Secular and humanistic viewpoints on euthanasia are obsessed with "quality of life" issues. While the term "quality of life" can be helpful in some contexts, it should not be the sole or the primary focus in end of life issues. So called, quality of life advocates believe that if any person can not enjoy or appreciate certain aspects of life, then that life is not worth living. Terri Schiavo had the best quality of life she could have under the circumstances. It appeared from observing her that Terri may actually have enjoyed her

diminished life even though many aspects of it were limited and unfortunate. Seventeen national disability rights groups in the nation weighed in and evaluated the court proceedings for Terri arguing that in the absence of clear and convincing evidence, Terri's life should not have been ended.

Terri's case had profound consequences for the future of all persons with similar disabilities. For the Christian, we know that God ultimately determines who lives and who dies. Any human life- born or unborn; black or white; rich or poor; handicapped or whole is valuable and precious because we are made in the image and likeness of God. As the crown point of all creation, human life is worthy of protection even if it suffers from so called defects or disabilities.

Natural Death

There is a significant and ontological difference between prolonging life and prolonging death. If a person is dying naturally, there is nothing immoral or unethical about allowing death to occur and not halting or prolonging the natural process of dying. However, Terri was never in an active dying process. She was living and it was morally wrong to end her life by removing essential food and water. Dying is a natural part of life. God has ordained that all men shall die once. As Christians we should not fear death because we know there is a greater place waiting for those who know and love God.

Ordinary vs. Extraordinary Care

The vast majority of Christian medical ethicists view food and water as ordinary care. Secular ethicists may disagree. However even if given by a feeding tube, nutrition and hydration are still ordinary, natural and necessary care needed to sustain any life. Babies are fed in their mother's wombs by "tubes" called umbilical cords. Patients everyday in hospitals are fed from tubes for various periods of time while recovering from injuries to the throat, esophagus or mouth. The presence of these tubes delivering food and water do not make babies or hospital patients less than human. Extraordinary care on the other hand is optional care designed to artificially keep major organs working and prevent them from failing. Ventilators, pacemakers, dialysis machines, or other devices which would keep major organs running artificially are considered extraordinary. These devices could be ethically removed by a patient or by a health care surrogate to allow a person to die naturally. A person at the end of life could legitimately refuse extraordinary care and die naturally as a legitimate expression of their confidence in the life to come.

Dehydration and Starvation

Death from dehydration and starvation is a brutal and gruesome form of death. The tongue and lips crack and bleed. The eyes recede into their orbits. The skin becomes so sensitive it peels off upon firm contact. Sometimes the lining of the nose cracks and bleeds and dried brain cells cause convulsions. With or without medication to elevate some of the agony, there is nothing necessarily dignified about dying from the slow and torturous process of being starved and or dehydrated to death.

The Coming Moral Crisis in Long Term Care

If we as a society fabricate a "right to die" then this can very easily devolve into a "duty to die". A duty to die is an assumption which says that those people who are older and of diminished functioning now have an obligation to society and to their families to end their own lives and not be a "burden". The duty to die mentality is a clear prescription for assisted suicide. There is a coming tide wave of baby boomers that will enter their senior years in record numbers as compared with the fewer citizens that will pay into the Medicare system. Today in Florida there are over one million people over the age of 65 who have no living relatives in the state. If we do not maintain a strong ethic of life there will be real incentives to even more seriously neglect and ignore the care and protection of the elderly members of our society.

True Religion and the Heart of God

In the Bible, the care for and defense of those who are weak, vulnerable, neglected and abandoned is called "true religion". At the start of life we are all totally dependent upon others for our care. The end of life is no different. At the beginning and at the end, we are all required to have faith, trust and total reliance upon another. There is a clue to the meaning of life in understanding this. All human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. Whether young or old, black or white, rich or poor, born or unborn, all human beings have inherent dignity, worth and value. This why government has a compelling interest in protecting the first and foremost human right-- the right to life. In fact Thomas Jefferson said "The chief purpose of government is to protect life. Abandon that and you have abandoned all." While many heroic attempts were made, by Jefferson's standard, government failed in its chief purpose. And in a government that is "of the people" we must share in that failure as well. On the first anniversary of Terri's death would that we all be provoked to greater love and commitment to our fellow man--- at every stage of life. May God have mercy upon us all.