

ASKING

the

RIGHT QUESTIONS



CONFRONTED BY THE INEVITABLE approach of death, Christians may be confronted with situations where it is highly improbable that continued medical therapy will produce beneficial results for the patient. It may even be that these procedures subject the dying person to further risk, are costly or are experimental in nature. In such cases, Christians guided by the truth that we are always to care and never to kill are often faced with difficult decisions. Mindful of the fact that “we [are not to] hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need” (Explanation to the Fifth Commandment in the Small Catechism), it is suggested that Christians consider the following questions when they must make decisions for themselves or others. These questions might be discussed with family members, medical professionals and one’s pastor.

- What is the medical prognosis given by the attending physician(s)? Has a “second opinion” been sought? Does this opinion confirm or call into question the original prognosis?
- Have the patient’s vital processes already begun to shut down, indicating that death is inevitable barring divine intervention?
- Is treatment being discontinued to hasten death (hence “choosing death”) or because the treatment itself has become burdensome with no realistic hope of recovery?
- Are there other pressures being applied that would tilt the bias toward death, such as the need for the patient’s organs for transplantation?
- Is adequate physical care (nutrition and hydration) provided for the dying person even when treatment is discontinued or life support systems are withdrawn?
- What spiritual advice and guidance has been provided by the pastor on the basis of the Holy Scriptures?

Family members should not think that they have to make decisions immediately, even though there may be pressures from medical personnel to do so. It may be helpful for the family to meet with the pastor outside of the medical facility in order to have a more prayerful, non-clinical setting for deliberation. When there is doubt about how to proceed, it is advised that we exercise a bias for life. It is better to err on the side of life than death.

Let your pastor help

The *Pastoral Care Companion* focuses the work of pastoral care of the dying and their families in circumstances where decisions will need to be made at the end of life: “Care of the irretrievably dying always includes provision of those ordinary items needed to sustain life (nutrition and hydration). Once the dying person’s vital processes have ceased their spontaneous functions, the decision may be made to discontinue the use of artificial means to prolong life or extraordinary forms of treatment. ... Trusting in the sure promises of our Lord’s resurrection, the pastor will use God’s Word to comfort and strengthen family members as they commend their dying loved ones to the hands of a merciful Savior.” Pastors will shepherd Christians through terrain where decisions cannot so easily be classified as “right” or “wrong,” with the realization that there are boundaries that we should not transgress. Hence we avoid doing anything that might be causative of death even as we recognize that there does come a time when we should no longer grab at this life as though it could be maintained forever.

Our confidence lies not in our ability to make perfect decisions in life-and-death matters where the boundaries are often blurred, but in Jesus Christ, who holds us in His merciful hands. Even our best decisions can be faulty.

We also trust in His forgiveness for the wrong decisions made out of ignorance or with minds darkened by sin. The Christian lives only by the promise that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin (SEE 1 JOHN 1:7).

Heeding the Lord’s call

When natural life is clearly ending, neither seeking death nor in futile desperation attempting to thwart or delay the inevitable, the Christian heeds the call of the Lord. In this sense, we may speak with Paul Althaus, a German Luther scholar of the last century, of the vocation to die: “To die willingly means to accept God as God, to honor Him as the One who alone has immortality, who is God by the very fact that He gives us life and has the right to take it back. We die to honor God. This is true all the more because He wants to be praised through our faith, and nothing calls for faith as much as dying. There is no other divine service like that in which man, with all his hopes and desires, with all his thirst for life, obediently submits to God’s call to die, and in his own end relies on God, commits himself into the hands of the Invisible when all things visible fade away. The perfection of the Son of God lies in His obedience to death. So we, too, must joyfully accept as God’s grace that He calls us to the divine service of dying. By our death we are allowed to give praise to God.” With faith in God’s promise to provide His children with the resurrection of the body to life everlasting, we can face death as the gateway to life everlasting with Him. LW

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Mercy at Life’s End also includes:



- Information on “death with dignity”
- Arguments against euthanasia’s elimination of sufferers rather than suffering
- Important distinctions regarding treatments and artificial means of prolonging a person’s life
- A guide for families making ethical end-of-life decisions

Excerpted from *Mercy at Life’s End: A Guide for Laity and Their Pastors*. Available for free download at lcms.org/life.



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