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Paul Badham
Is there a Christian Case for Assisted Dying
(SPCK Publishing 2009)

Reviewed by Anne Harvey - 2026

After 37 years practising medicine, including attachments to the local hospice, I retired in no doubt of my answer to the question posed by the title of this book.

No matter how good the palliative care available, or how dedicated the staff, some patients reach the end of their earthly lives in overwhelming pain, in deep distress and crying out, often for their mothers. None of us hope for this sort of death for ourselves, or indeed want to witness such suffering in those we love.

Yet Pope John-Paul 2 wrote that "suffering in the final stages of life has a special place in God's plan of salvation". This never sat comfortably with my experiences.

While attending a course entitled "Dying well" at Ridley Hall in Cambridge in 2012, as part of my training for ordination, I was privileged to hear Revd Prof Paul Badham speak and as a result bought this excellent book *Is there a Christian Case for Assisted Dying*. For me, this speaker and his writing enabled me to square the circle of my medical experiences and conventional theological teaching. Although the book was published in 2009, Badham's arguments remain cogent today.

The points which resonated so powerfully for me were these:

Divine determination of the hour of our death, if the argument is valid, negates all medical interventions of every sort. The UK is peppered with public access defibrillators. We go to considerable lengths to resuscitate those at the point of death, to say nothing of vaccination, surgery, pharmacological intervention and more indeed in my 37 years of practice!

Life is a gift of God to be treasured but there are times at the end of life when lives become a travesty of what human life should be. Indeed from a NT perspective “The gift of God is eternal life" and on that basis the gift of life is not diminished by earthly death.

The early pronouncements of the Anglican church (my tradition) suggested that "Any change in the law would negatively redefine health care and would have far reaching and damaging effects on the nature of our society". There was no international evidence to support this assertion at the time, and as an increasing number of countries have enacted legislation, there remains no evidence of radical societal change. Indeed, 8 years after the introduction of the Dignity in Dying Act in Oregon, the Oregon Hospice Association acknowledged "Absolutely none of our dire predictions has been realised." Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg had similar experiences in 2013; the list is longer now.

Jesus' golden rule, "Love God and love your neighbour as yourself" might be interpreted more generally as "always treat others as you would like to be treated yourself". Opinion polls repeatedly show that a majority of the UK public, and indeed of regular church going Christians, would want the option of an assisted death if they found themselves suffering unbearably in the final stages of a terminal illness. As a doctor, my application of this maxim was the "me" test. Does what is being offered to my patient pass the "me" test? Would this be acceptable to me, work for me, offer me the choices I want to have? And if it wouldn't do for me, I would endeavour to re shape the options until they met that standard.

St Paul is clear that the great new insight Jesus embodied was the emphasis on compassionate love (agape in Greek, caritas in Latin). Paul makes it clear to the people of Corinth, this is more important than faith, or hope, or readiness to be martyred. When suffering or realistically anticipated suffering is so great, the hallmark of Christian compassionate love is surely to alleviate suffering in any way possible, and within that range of possibilities must lie the option of a gently assisted death.

Sometimes when wrestling with the essential minutiae of the political and legal details, with strategies and forms of words, it is easy to forget that the fundamental mission, of those of us who work towards legislation for assisted dying to be enacted in Scotland, is the relief of suffering for individuals at the most vulnerable, most desperate and most frightening time in earthly life. I believe this is our most persuasive argument and one we should adhere to throughout debates at every level



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