



# **The Biblical basis for human dignity**

## **A reminder for pastors**

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## Introduction

The Assisted Dying Bill presented by the Labour MP Kim Leadbeater was passed in the House of Commons by a vote of 314 to 291 on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025, and is now being considered in the House of Lords. The bill received its Second Reading in the House of Lords on Sept 19<sup>th</sup>, 2025. It is currently going through further legislative stages in the Lords. Before the bill becomes law, both houses must agree on the exact wording.

The presentation of this bill to Parliament has caused a monumental paradigm shift in how we talk about death and dying. The bill has been dubbed by the Christian community as the 'Assisted Suicide Bill' as it erodes the sacred gift of life given to us by God. Whether this bill finally becomes law, it is already changing the narrative of how society discusses caring for the sick and elderly in our communities. As narratives change, practice follows, so you as the local pastor need to be literate with both the theological underpinning of what the bible has to say about this issue and the practical application for your church to serve the dying and bereaved.

This article consists of 10 theological foundations that emphasise the sanctity of life. Each section offers a biblical perspective followed by practical applications with reflective questions to support your development both in preaching and pastoral practice.

What we believe about the nature of human beings will determine how we treat them.

If we believe they are simply molecular accidents brought about by blind natural forces, then terminating their existence is an act of little difference from that of swatting a fly. It's not worth a second thought. If we believe that they belong to no-one but themselves and are ultimately answerable only to themselves, then it follows that they are free to determine the length of their lives and to decide when to call time on themselves. And with advances in modern technology and medical science all this, including the taking of the lives of others (not least in abortion) and the taking of one's own life (as in 'assisted suicide') can all be made to seem very clean, reasonable and even compassionate.

Any innate sense of human dignity makes no sense in terms of a secular / meaningless universe. But it chimes in with a generally Christian attitude to life which flows from what the Bible teaches about human beings. Both the OT and the NT have much to say concerning how we ought to view ourselves and one another as members of mankind. And it is these values which, until recently, have governed our attitudes. Our assumption has been, 'It is better to give life than take it'. Here we give ten theological foundations that Scripture teaches about mankind. All point to the value and importance of every human being.

## 1. Man's design

Genesis chapter 1 recalls the making of our world. It describes the first six days of creation and consists mainly of a list of commands by the voice of God, Genesis 1.3, 1.6, 1.9 etc. Each creature is made 'according to its kind' 1.12 etc. But when it comes to the creation of man things are different. *First*, there is a unique reflection by God on what he is about to do. 'Let us make man...' 1.26. And then comes the biggest surprise. Man is not made 'according to his kind', but in God's own likeness. 'Let us make man in our image.' God himself is the blueprint for people and that applies equally to both men and women, 1.27 [1]. Unlike Darwinian ideas, man's nearest 'relative' is not an ape but God himself. Instead of thinking of ourselves as 'naked apes' we are actually 'God's offspring', Acts 17.29. Our humanity consists in looking up not down. This endows every human being, rich or poor, old or young, and of whatever ethnicity with a vast dignity. It means that every human life is precious.

### Practical implications

Care for the dying and bereaved needs to be modelled by the church in a way that reflects people as image bearers. This means that we do not discriminate between people in terms of their age, ethnicity, social circumstances, sexual orientation, mental capacity and evident sin. This means caring for those who might be perceived to be unlovely or difficult.

### Questions

In what ways do you find caring for some people more difficult than others?

What biases can you identify in yourself? Are there ways you can overcome these?

[1] The generic use of 'man' for mankind is Biblical language and of course, includes women. Male and female are not two different species, but both are equally human beings.

## **2. Man's creation**

While the making of man is mentioned in Genesis 1, more detail is given in Genesis 2. The unique dignity of man is underlined here. Man's body is formed of the dust of the earth, but then we are told that God uses his own breath, his Spirit, to breathe life into man's body, Genesis 2.7. There is nothing parallel to this for any other creature. We were made to be living recipients of God, the Holy Spirit. This difference is underlined as God brings the various animals to Adam, but from among the animals, 'there was not found a helper fit for him,' 2.20. It is only when woman is created out of Adam's very own body, Genesis 2.21, 22 that Adam feels he has 'met his match'. Adam voices the first human poetry, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh, she shall be called Woman because she was taken out of man,' 2.23. Woman carries the same dignity of being made in God's image. Though we are so small compared with our vast universe, God made us just a little lower than the angels and that is true for all of us, Psalm 8.5.

### **Practical implications**

Every human life is sacred, and God breathed, so every person deserves reverence and protection. When caring for people, both the physical (the body) and spiritual needs attention. The relationship with God lies at the heart of human life regardless of whether it is acknowledged by the individual or not.

### **Questions**

How do you demonstrate during your pastoral care of the dying and bereaved the sacredness of each individual?

What does giving attention to the body and the spirit imply for your pastoral practice?

How will people notice this in practice?

### **3. Man's calling**

The image of God, the Creator, is underlined by man's calling. God's making of the world is called his 'work', Genesis 2.2. Now the man, with woman as his helper, Genesis 2.18, is called to be a worker, 2.15. And the nature of the work is both God-like and God-honouring. Not only, like the other creatures are they to be fruitful and multiply, Genesis 1.22, 1.28 but they are also to rule over creation, 1.28 – a picture or image of God on earth. They are to 'subdue' or nurture the earth and bring that which was outside Eden to fruition. Further, as Genesis speaks of Adam working and keeping Eden, it is using language later used in the OT of priests in their duties in God's holy place, the temple. So, mankind's rule of the earth as God's image is meant to be caring, reverent and protective and not exploitative. This honours God the Creator.

#### **Practical implications**

During dying and bereavement, pastoral care needs to offer reverence and protection at times when people are most vulnerable. This is work that honours God and at times is demanding, frustrating, awkward, satisfying and joyful. This reflects the general experience of men and women seeking to fulfil their calling.

#### **Questions**

How might you develop your pastoral care to offer greater reverence and protection to the dying and bereaved?

What risks of exploitation do you see in pastoral care in this context and how might you mitigate them?

## 4. Man's rest

Not only is the nature of mankind's work God-like, man and woman's pattern of work and rest reflects or 'images' God too. In Genesis 2.1-4 we read of God resting from his work of creation on the seventh day. From then on, six days work and the seventh being for rest, becomes what is meant to be man's routine as well. The Sabbath principle is rooted in creation. This is especially emphasized in the 10 commandments given to Israel later at Sinai. *First*, the fourth commandment begins with the word '*Remember* the Sabbath...' implying that Israel already knew about this. *Second*, the reason for the commandment is spelled out 'for in six days God created the heavens and earth... but on the seventh he rested,' Exodus 20.8-11. The implication for man is 'you must do as God did.' [2]. The fact that the pattern of rest imitates God shows just how important the image of God is for man.

### Practical implications

Since rest is fundamental to God's created order, it is necessary to consider how rest can be enabled in the context of caring for the dying and the bereaved. Pastoral care can be very busy at these times and demanding much of individuals, both the dying person, carers and pastoral team. There is a risk that rest can be overlooked in practice.

### Questions

What approaches to enabling rest can be taken during these difficult times?

For yourself?

For the dying person?

For the care givers?

For the pastoral team?

[2] The fact that Israel knew of the Sabbath before Sinai is seen in Exodus 18.

## 5. Man's Fall

As the Genesis account proceeds, we hit the tragedy of mankind's fall into sin and rebellion against God. This not only brings us all under condemnation, but it also changes our nature to become 'natural' enemies of God, always prone to think the worst of him. However, remarkably, although this certainly damages the image of God in us, we nevertheless continue to carry that image, and the dignity associated with it. Writing to Christians concerning how we speak of other people, all part of fallen humanity, James, the half-brother of Jesus speaks of the sinful inconsistency of using our tongues to praise God while we 'curse people who are made in the likeness of God,' James 3.9. Neither sin itself nor its consequences remove the image of God from mankind. We are all special, including the elderly or the disabled or those with special needs are to be treated with anything other than proper respect.

### Practical implications

In spite of the Fall and its many consequences, people retain God's image. This is the case even when a person is dying. Pastorally we therefore are called to treat all people with kindness and respect in their time of weakness. This respects the way they retain the reflection of God. This may be a challenge when faced with a person whom we judge to have sinned grievously and appears unrepentant. Prayer and support from others in this context will be a help in maintaining a respectful approach. In supporting those who are bereaved, we retain a sense of the fallenness of all people such that, even though their reactions are difficult to stay with, they too deserve respect.

### Questions

How do you respond to people whom you find difficult?

What strategies can you adopt to demonstrate to such people that they are image bearers?

How do you react to your own frailties and weaknesses in the context of dying and bereavement?

How can you find support?

## **6. Man's spirituality**

God speaks to man, Genesis 2.15-18. This is the essence of true spirituality and there is nothing comparable to this concerning any of the other creatures God has made. God gives Adam instruction concerning his use of the Garden of Eden and his need of a partner, 2.18. This communication between God and man, along with Adam's need of a partner, indicates that man is to be a relational being, just as God himself is. Again, we are confronted with the fact that human beings are made in God's image. Indeed, the Bible itself indicates this. Though it is mostly about God, it is written for men and woman to read. Made in his image, God communicates with us.

### **Practical implications**

In the process of dying and in bereavement God is never silent. He continues his relationship with those He made in His image during these difficult times. To hear God speak we turn to His Word. Therefore, a pastoral carer needs a copy of the Bible with them as they seek to walk alongside the sufferer. Knowing which parts of Scripture offer comfort at times of death and grieving is a practical and caring service we can offer. The aim is not for Bible knowledge to impress, but to enable those going through death and grieving hear Jesus speak with them personally. The carer can't force or predict this but can themselves pray that Jesus will apply His living Word during the trial. Learning which parts of Scripture can be a particular blessing is a vital practical application.

### **Questions**

Do you have prepared passages of Scripture that are most likely to speak into the challenges faced by the dying person and the bereaved?

What approaches to sharing Scripture with others have you found most helpful?  
What have you learned from these experiences?

How might you apply this learning in the context of dying and grieving?

What difficulties might there be in doing so and how can they be overcome?

## **7. Man's salvation**

The uniqueness of mankind though seen in our creation is also reinforced by our salvation. Mankind is sinful. We have rebelled against our Maker and deserve to be cast away by him into everlasting darkness. According to Scripture a similar situation pertains to the fallen angels who followed Satan. But it is only for mankind, not the angels, that God has a rescue plan. 'God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life,' John 3.16. Mankind is special to God.

### **Practical implications**

The value God puts upon people can be measured by the fact that He gave His precious Son, Jesus Christ to save us. This means that we must always seek to value people to the extent that God does. So, regardless of our perception of people, God seeks to be reunited in a saving relationship with each one. This means that for each dying person there is an opportunity to come to Christ for the first time to find salvation. For each bereaved person there is a possibility to meet God amid sadness and loss. These truths prompt us to demonstrate the level of compassion and care that God has expressed to us who have been saved by God's grace.

### **Questions**

How can we practically demonstrate God's love for individuals who are dying or who are bereaved?

What attitudes can we develop that will enable us to care with compassion given what we know about God's salvation in Christ?

What Bible passages might be most useful to us in conversation with the dying and bereaved?

## **8. Christ's incarnation**

In pursuing this salvation plan, God, in the person of his Son, the second Person of the Trinity, became man in Jesus Christ. He took on our flesh and blood (the meaning of 'incarnation'). He became one with us in order that he might truly be one of us, understand us first hand and represent us before God his Father. This he did for us and for no other creature, Hebrews 2.16, 17. Those in whom God invests himself so deeply deserve to be treated with dignity.

### **Practical implications**

The truth that Christ became a person, a human being, underlines for us the importance God places upon us in the scheme of creation. We are unique. We are not animals or any other creature. This means that great care should be taken regarding how we treat one another. In death and in grieving we recognise the immeasurable worth of each person-of each other. Respect is therefore given to the body of a person and not only their soul. This means that care is not just for the soul of a person but the whole. The implications are that attention is given to the physical comfort and pain relief for the dying as well as the physical health of the bereaved. This can be demanding.

### **Questions**

How comfortable are you in dealing with the human body at times of dying?

Have you witnessed someone die?

What support and personal development will be helpful for you in coping with the physicality of death?

What might be the bodily needs of the grieving person?

## **9. Christ's death**

This love of God for lost men and women is seen supremely in Christ's death, paying the penalty for human sin, on the cross. The apostle Paul reflects on the fact this love has no parallel, even in the best of human actions. 'For one would scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one might dare even to die – but God shows his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us,' Romans 5.8.

### **Practical implications**

For the Christian, Christ's death on our behalf is the great motivator to love and care for our fellow human beings. Giving people worth, especially in the most difficult times of their lives is a reflection of the worth God places upon us. This worth is most supremely demonstrated by Christ's death on the cross. God's love for people is clearly demonstrated in the death of Christ. We seek to reflect that love in the practical care of people.

### **Questions**

How motivated are you to care for people in the sacrificial manner Christ demonstrated on the cross?

How can we stir up sacrificial love amongst us?

Have you received such sacrificial love in your life?

What can you learn from the experience and how can you apply the lessons to your care for the dying and the bereaved?

## **10. Christ's resurrection**

There is a big stress in the NT on the physical nature of Christ's resurrection on the first Easter Sunday. Mary Magdalene can hold on to him, Matthew 28.9. His disciples can eat and drink with him, Acts 10.41. In heaven the ascended Jesus still carries the physical scars of crucifixion, Revelation 5.6. The incarnation is permanent and his resurrection to eternal life is but the 'first fruits' of the resurrection of all who believe. Once again, this shows the immeasurable importance and therefore dignity that God places on human beings.

With such an understanding, the taking of human life becomes a huge issue, Genesis 9.5, 6. It should never be undertaken lightly, and in particular should never be contemplated concerning innocent people. To act in such a way is to seek to play God and should be considered abominable. God loves human beings and so should we.

### **Practical implications**

Christ rose bodily. This again demonstrates the value God places upon the bodies of people and therefore so should we. The resurrection also forces us to consider the truth that when a person dies physically, God has determined that eternal life follows. So, the process of dying is opening a new beginning -either with Him or separated from Him in hell. This means we care for the dying and the bereaved with an eye to the eternal realities and a desire to see all people saved. This adds urgency and priority to demonstrating the love of Christ practically at the ending of a person's life. The bereaved person can be supported to consider these profound truths through the care offered to them.

### **Questions**

How does the resurrection of Christ impact on your understanding of who He is and who people are in God's mind and heart?

How does this truth add an urgency to your witnessing for Christ, even at times of great human trauma and pain?

What hope does the resurrection offer people who are dying and grieving?

## **Conclusion**

This paper provides ten theological foundations that emphasise the importance of the sanctity of life as a biblical response to the Assisted Dying debate. It not only discusses the theological underpinning but considers the practical implications for the pastor, pastoral team and the church as they provide support and care.

Dealing with the dying and bereaved for those new to pastoral ministry may feel daunting at the beginning. However, it is hoped that this paper encourages the pastor to grapple with both the theology and practice as they minister to those walking through the valley of the shadow of death in a changing society.



