

The ethics of suicide and assisted suicide

My other article in *OrthodoxyToday* spoke to persons thinking of killing themselves. The present article is directed to people who contemplate helping them do so, whether on a broad basis as part of some “right to dignified death” movement, or moved by personal compassion in a single individual case to spare someone they love from physical or mental pain or disability. The present article surveys the teachings of the earliest Christians, Christians removed at most only a few generations from Christ and who preserved His spirit and words and Bible interpretations, to ascertain whether suicide and assisting suicide conform to Jesus’ way of love for all humankind. This article is therefore relevant to all people interested in Christian ethics, and to people who believe that if they kill themselves they will be mercifully welcomed into a better existence in heaven.



First of all, we have the case of the jailer in Philippi in Macedonia who was exercising custody over the Apostles Paul and Silas. Just as the jailer was about to kill himself with his own sword, Paul shouted to him: “Do yourself no harm!” (Acts 16.28). As a result of the turnkey sparing himself and listening to Paul’s subsequent presentation of the gospel he discovered his life to be much more worthwhile than he had thought and was soon rejoicing (Acts 16.34).

This same Apostle Paul, who had witnessed many such lives turn round for the happier, instructed his readers to “abide in faith, hope and love” (1 Corinthians 13.13). This is an absolute command for all Christians; it does not allow for circumstances to water it down. Nothing indicates a lack of the virtue of hope more than suicide.

Dating from the first half of the second century AD, the *Sentences of Sextus* is a collection of sayings on points of Christian ethics. It was so popular that it was widely distributed and translated into many languages. It rephrases the teachings of the Bible on disdaining the desires of the body, and reminds us that we are to treat it to the glory of God. Saying 321 specifically forbids causing one's own death: although a Christian must be ready to submit to martyrdom imposed by lawful authority, s/he must not take their own life.

Later authors went into more detail. Justin was a widely traveled student of philosophy who later converted to Christianity and became a Christian teacher at Rome. He wrote whole books explaining Christians and their practices to pagan or Jewish readers. In the middle of the second century he gave reasons why suicide is forbidden to Christians:

We have been taught that God did not make the world aimlessly, but for the sake of the human race; and we have before stated that He takes pleasure in those who imitate His properties, and is displeased with those that embrace what is worthless either in word or deed. If, then, we all kill ourselves, we shall become the cause, as far as in us lies, why no one should be born, or instructed in the divine doctrines, or even why the human race should not exist; and we shall, if we so act, be ourselves acting in opposition to the will of God.[\[1\]](#)

In the Middle East about the time of Justin some believers collected memories of the Apostle John and his teachings. One of them relates to murder-suicide. A young man had murdered his father because the father often tried to dissuade him from adultery with a particular married woman. Fearing the death penalty for this murder, and out of possessiveness for the woman, he resolved to kill her and her husband and then take his own life. John counseled him not to do so, took him to right the accomplished murder, rebuked him for his wicked deed and thoughts, and led him to repentance.[\[2\]](#)

In discussing other topics relevant to religion, Irenaeus cites as a given that Christians do not choose suicide.[\[3\]](#) Irenaeus had associated in his youth with Christians who had personally interacted with the apostles, including a man who was probably the “angel of the church in Smyrna” in Revelation 2.8. Irenaeus became a pastor in southern France and wrote in the AD 180s. Throughout his books he emphasized carrying on the teachings that he and other men of his generation received from older Christians in a line back to the apostles.

Clement of Alexandria was dean of Christendom's leading educational institution in the AD 190s. In the category of “children of darkness” and “children of wrath” he included the lustful, people without sexual self-restraint, idolaters, robbers, murderers of neighbors, and suicides.[\[4\]](#)

Does a person sin by helping or consenting to the sin of another person, such as suicide? Does a person sin by knowingly providing a gun or poison to a person intent on killing themselves or another? Is a mere conspirator as culpable as the actual perpetrator? The answer is “yes” according to the Bible and its first interpreters who preserved Jesus’ interpretations of it and His oral teachings.

First and oldest is Proverbs 1.10 in the Old Testament: “if sinners entice thee, consent thou not.” In the New Testament, Paul appears to consider himself in some way guilty of the death of Stephen by stoning because he consented to the execution and minimally assisted by being temporary custodian of the clothing of those who actually threw the stones (Acts 22.20). First Timothy 5.22 warns the reader not to “be partaker in other men’s sins”. The Bible applies this to seemingly minor matters: 2 John 11 forbids even wishing God’s blessing on a heretic “For he that biddeth him God’s speed is a partaker of his evil deeds”.



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Christian writers of the first half of second century concurred. According to the *Sentences of Sextus* 150, approving or sanctioning a sin renders it unbearable. The *Revelation of Peter*, which some in very early times would have included in the Bible, describes the place and torments in hell for “murderers and those who conspired with them”.^[5] The *Traditions of Matthias* were even stricter as to the culpability of a person who in any way contributed to a given sin without actually perpetrating it:

They say in the Traditions that Matthew the apostle constantly said, that “if the neighbor of an elect man sin, the elect man has sinned. For had he conducted

himself as the Word prescribes, his neighbor also would have been filled with such reverence for the life he led as not to sin.”[6]

In the AD 180s Irenaeus forbade consenting “to those who act wickedly.”[7] Clement of Alexandria counseled praying only with people of the most sinless character “For it is a dangerous thing to take part in others’ sins.”[8] Clement also alluded to 1 Corinthians 5.11, forbidding so much as eating with an unrepentant Christian sinner. [9]

In the late second or early third century Tertullian, a former lawyer and the founder of Latin Christian literature, maintained that we must abstain not only from actual sin but also from the means by which other people can sin:

For although the fault be done by others, it makes no difference if it be by my means. In no case ought I to be necessary to another, while he is doing what to me is unlawful. Hence I ought to understand that care must be taken by me, lest what I am forbidden to do be done by my means. In short, in another cause of no lighter guilt I observe that fore-judgment.[10]

Giving examples, Tertullian wrote that (1) because fornication is forbidden to Christians, so also is keeping a brothel or pimping or otherwise promoting prostitution, (2) because murder is against God’s law, so is training people to kill, and (3) just as idolatry is forbidden, so also is providing sacrificial victims and incense.[11] As a prominent lawyer, Tertullian must have been acquainted with wrongful-death cases.

Clement’s successor became the most outstanding Bible scholar and preacher of the first half of the third century. Origen preached that a person can be polluted not only by his own sin but also by associating with an actual malefactor, e.g. by being friend of someone who is malicious, idolatrous, or given to rages, without personally practising the wickedness. To avoid sharing in another’s sin, it is necessary to separate oneself from such persons as a seducer of wives, person who hates his brother, and the sacrilegious.[12] In support of his position, Origen quoted Paul’s instruction in 1 Corinthians 5.9-11 that Christians are not to eat with or otherwise associate with a Christian who is a fornicator, idolater, slanderer, drunkard, or extortionist.[13] Tertullian wrote in a similar vein after detailing some sins: “It is not enough that we do no such things ourselves, unless we break all connection also with those who do”.[14]

Of course, some people bent on doing what Christian ethics considers evil try to quibble that their particular case constitutes an implied exception and that the “spirit” of Christian morality justifies such an act, e.g. killing oneself or another. But the authorities from the church’s foundational period do not contemplate exceptions in any circumstances.[15] Indeed, the purpose of the present article in consulting the

near-Biblical sources is to find any such “spirit” and whether the early hearers of the message of Jesus and the apostles understood Him in the full force of their words, which would indicate how the New Testament writers meant themselves to be understood.

One reason for suicide or assisting in it is that disease, affliction or disability will render a person useless or a burden to others, such as family or church. The Christian view was stated in a description of Christian morals and doctrines by Bardesanes in early third-century Syria, who shared the worth of all human lives and their value to society. The infirmities of old age or disease or bodily defects do not render a potential suicide victim totally useless. After writing of wrongdoing, particularly stealing, lying, acts of profligacy, hatred, and deception, Bardesanes pointed out:

For even if a man be poor, and sick, and old, and disabled in his limbs, he is able to avoid doing all these things. And, as he is able to avoid doing these things, so is he able to love, and to bless, and to speak the truth, and to pray for what is good for everyone with whom he is acquainted.[\[16\]](#)

Lastly, we have the teaching and example of Christ Himself. First, whoever inflicts death through suicide on the least of His brothers or sisters inflicts it on Jesus (Matthew 25:35-45). Down through the centuries, the killing of Jesus has been regarded as a particularly heinous outrage. Secondly, when Jesus encountered people who were diseased, handicapped or suffering, He always did his best to relieve their afflictions for the rest of their natural lives; He never “put them out of their misery” by helping them kill themselves or recommended that they do so.

This article was originally published as “The Ethics of Assisted Suicide” in OrthodoxyToday.org, December 10, 2010. It is posted here under the direct permission of Dr. David W. T. Brattston.

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[\[1\]](#) Justin Martyr 2 Apology 4.

[\[2\]](#) Acts of John 48-54.

[\[3\]](#) Irenaeus Against Heresies 5.12.3 last sentence.

[\[4\]](#) Clement of Alexandria Stromata 3.18.

[\[5\]](#) Revelation of Peter 24.

- [6] Quoted in Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* 7.13.
- [7] Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 4.30.3.
- [8] Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* 7.7.
- [9] Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* 3.18.
- [10] Tertullian *On Idolatry* 11.
- [11] Tertullian *On Idolatry* 11.
- [12] Origen *Homilies on Leviticus* 5.10.5.
- [13] Origen *Homilies on Leviticus* 3.3.3; 5.10.5.
- [14] Tertullian *De Spectaculis* 15.
- [15] Tertullian *De Corona* 11; Origen *Commentary on Romans* 6.3.5.
- [16] Bardesanes *On Fate*.