



Feeding Tubes II

Pull the Tube?

“Carry each others burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

“...for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Christ Jesus is revealed” (1 Peter 1:6-7).

Are avoiding suffering and not being a burden to others worthy goals for the Christian? Under certain circumstances. Are they a major priority for the faithful child of God? No. Are there times when they may get in the way of God’s will for us? Definitely.

About a year and a half ago I wrote in this space about the Terry Schiavo case in Florida. The battle to remove her feeding tube has been going on since 1996. Now the courts have allowed her “husband,” who has abandoned her in every way except by legal divorce, to have her feeding tube removed. Since March 18th she has been slowly starving to death. Although she is severely brain damaged, she does not have a condition which makes death imminent. As I write this she is just as alive as anyone else on the planet. The “quality” of her life may have changed. The presence of life in her body has not...yet.

As Christians and as a church we are not in a position to control the decisions of others. That is not our calling. The Apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians, “What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside.” For that purpose—controlling the behavior of others—he has given us the government. As citizens in a democratic society our citizenship does give us the right and responsibility to try to influence the government to do what is just and moral. We are then acting in our role as citizens, not church members. May God move us to take that role we play in governing our country seriously, and to use it faithfully to serve him and those around us! Those who have contacted their lawmakers and judges with their views on life issues are making faithful use of the privileges and powers God has given them.

A case like Terry Schiavo’s also gives us the opportunity to consider again how God’s word applies to end of life issues for ourselves. Members of our own church have expressed to me that they don’t want to linger in suffering for a long time before they die.



They don't want to become a burden to their families in the last weeks, months, or years of their lives. I don't want to suffer or become a burden, either.

But God has not left that for us to decide. God himself allows us to suffer, and when he does, it is always for our good. Isn't that what he is saying in 1 Peter 1? Suffering refines our faith. In the book of Hebrews we are reminded that God uses it to discipline us. For us to do things to hurry our death when we are suffering denies God the chance to accomplish his goals for our faith and life. It pits our will against his. Those who trust him will trust him to end their suffering—by death or by other means—when he is ready. We don't starve ourselves or others to death (itself a miserable, painful way to die) just because we are suffering through some grave disability or illness.

To some it seems unselfish to avoid becoming a burden to our loved ones. If we die sooner, they will not have to invest so much time or money in us, and they will be free to live their own lives and take care of their families.

But where is it written that God never wants us to become a burden to someone else? We should not actively try to be burdensome to others. But when situations beyond our control make us a burden, nowhere does God suggest that he wants us to shorten our lives as a means of relieving others. Those who become a burden because of illness or disability play an important role. They actually carry out a valuable service to God and to others in their neediness. They become the objects to whom people can show truly unconditional love. They create the opportunity for Christians to selflessly love their neighbors.

I have witnessed first hand the many blessings God can bring when a loved one lingers for a long time before death as a "burden" to the family. It makes family members more unselfish. It enables them to reach heights of love and self-sacrifice they might never have reached before. It teaches them to put aside petty differences and be reconciled to each other. It makes them more fervent in prayer. It helps them to develop better priorities. God gets great volumes of work done in his people when they "carry each other's burdens and in this way... fulfill the law of Christ."

If you are considering drawing up a medical directive to guide your family in making decisions in case you become incapacitated, don't forget God's claim on your life. We may not be obligated to use every desperate measure to keep someone alive when it's clear God is calling his child home. But he still has a use for us so long as there is life in our bodies. Let's acknowledge that life and death are still his call.

In Christ, Pastor Vieths