Suicide and Early Christian Values

Suicide was not a problem for the early Christian community. There is no shred of evidence of suicide by Christians for the first 250 years of the Christian era. We know of no Christian in that period of time committing suicide under any circumstances or for any reason, unless one should argue that Judas is the one exception. It was so inherently contrary to Christian values and priorities that it was not considered a viable option for Christians.

According to Amundsen, "some modern scholars" have made "highly distorted conclusions about early Christian attitudes toward suicide." They argue that the early Christians were morbidly obsessed with death and believed that life on earth was important only as a preparation for the hereafter; their supreme duty was to avoid sin, which would result in perpetual punishment. They argue that many early Christians committed suicide for fear of falling before temptation. They blame Augustine for being the architect of the Christian condemnation of suicide and argue that his position was not authentically Christian.

Their position is mistaken. Augustine "clarified and provided a theologically cogent explanation of and justification for the position held by earlier and contemporary Christian sources."

It is remarkable that towards the end of the patristic era some sources did approve of one form of suicide, that is, suicide by women to preserve their chastity. For the rest, it must be said that for many early Christians spiritual life took precedence over physical life. "The Christian was frequently urged to give his life willingly as a martyr if the only alternative was denying Christ." In case of sickness, the Christian was urged to "seek healing," but not to "cling desperately to life," for his sickness was "potentially the God-given vehicle for his 'homegoing'."

Suicide and Reformed Values

In general, the Reformers of the sixteenth century and the Reformers of the so-called second Reformation strongly condemn suicide. Calvin, for instance, in a sermon on 1 Samuel 31:1-6 calls suicide an appalling and abominable crime before God. According to Calvin, we must learn to be ready for death when God orders it. In the meantime we ought to wait for the time when He Who as sovereign Commander has placed us in this world, calls us home.

According to some, King Saul was courageous and steadfast to end his own life rather than falling into the hands of his enemies. Calvin strongly disagrees. True Christian courage and
steadfastness calls us to take our place here till God calls us away from that place. Similar views were held by other Reformed theologians and pastors. The Dutch theologian, K. Exalto, refers to men such as Jeremias Bastingius (1551-1595), Wilhemus Brakel (1635-1711), William Ames (1576-1633), Johannes Marck (1656-1731), and Willem Teelinck (1579-1629). By way of summary, Exalto writes: "All their fingers pointed to the words sin, guilt, God's judgment. In this regard there has been no disagreement in the Christian tradition.

The Need to be Uncompromising but Compassionate

K. Exalto writes: "The Gospel teaches us to hate sin and to love the sinner. It is so easy to fall into extremes at this point. On the one hand, we can so abhor the sin, particularly in this instance the sin of suicide, that we can no longer properly judge the sinner. On the other hand, we can show so much compassion and sympathy for the person who committed suicide that we no longer disapprove of their action. Both extremes are incorrect." In these words Exalto expresses a tension which stands out throughout his book. While he resolutely rejects suicide, he at the same time compassionately draws attention to the complex motives for suicide. He is gentle towards those who committed suicide and pastorally reaches out to those struggling with this issue.

Exalto shows that the Christian theologians and pastors who in the course of the centuries have dealt with this issue and the persons involved in general have kept themselves from making a judgment as to the eternal destiny of those who have committed suicide. Luther compared those who committed suicide with persons who, while travelling through a forest, were murdered by highwaymen. They do not commit the crime of suicide voluntarily but rather because they have been overpowered by Satan. In one of his Tabletalk's, he said: "I do not share the opinion that self-murderers are certainly lost. Nevertheless, one should not hold up such a pronouncement to the common people, for then Satan is easily given opportunity to cause people to commit suicide." He opens the door only "a crack," in order that no one will abuse this compassion and no afflicted person will give in to the evil impulses which the devil wields on him or her. Luther wholly condemns suicide, but compassionately thinks of and speaks about the afflicted person who dies by his or her own hand. Many others thought along the same lines. Calvin, for instance, refused to pass a final judgment on king Saul. He refrained from making a general pronouncement along the lines of "all self-murders perish in hell."

Pastors such as John Bunyan (1628-1688), Wilhemus Brakel (1635-1711) and possibly also Bernardus Smytegelt (1665-1739) believed and said that self-murderers are certainly lost and are in hell. But many other theologians and pastors from the Reformation, such as Martin Luther (1483-1546), John Calvin (1509-1564), William Perkins (1558-1602), and Second Reformation theologians such as Gisbertus Voetius (1588-1676), William Ames (1576-1633), Samuel Maresius (1599-1673), Godefridus Cornelisz Udemans (1580-1649), Petrus de Witte (1622-1669), and Simon Oomius (1630-1707), and many others refused to pronounce a
Who are we to make a judgment about self-murderers? Who can suspect what goes on in a person's soul before he dies by his own hand? We must leave the judgment with regard to a self-murderer to God. J. Douma refers to G. Voetius who distinguished between those who directly and of their own choice kill themselves and those who accidentally and in ignorance kill themselves. How sick or deranged was that woman's mind when she jumped off the 10th floor? What went on in the heart of the man who hanged himself from the shower? To be sure, there is the commandment not to kill, but the judgment regarding the man or woman who committed suicide belongs to God. Nevertheless, we need to emphasize that the act of self-murder is a serious violation of the commandment of God.

W. H. Velema argues that we should not play down the seriousness of the sin of suicide, as if it is in the same category as other sins for which we need to daily ask for forgiveness. In self-murder a person says no to the gift of life and the grace of God to live. The sin of suicide is different from all other sins in that it can be committed only once. Those who commit suicide cannot ask for forgiveness after the act, unless in the very final moment there is still a cry for mercy for Christ's sake. It doesn't say anywhere in the Bible or in our creedal statements that self-murder equals the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which according to Matthew 12:31 "shall not be forgiven." Nevertheless, we may not conclude from these words of the Lord Jesus that therefore the sin of suicide is pardonable. Still, I would not dare say that every self-murderer is lost and in hell forever.

The Weapon Against Suicide
The weapon against suicide is the believing confession that one may not and need not commit suicide. Paul writes to the church of God in Corinth that "God is faithful, Who will not suffer you to be tempted above that you are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). God's faithfulness in Christ is a compelling reason to reject suicide, even in the most distressing situation. Whatever intensifying temptation there may be to commit suicide, there is hope in Jesus Christ. He is our hope. Christian hope is given to us particularly in the miracle of Christ's resurrection from the dead. From this miracle there is the way--not to death--but to life.

Prevention
We may not assist anyone to commit suicide. On the contrary, we must do our best to prevent suicide. At the same time we must realize that even with the best prevention suicide sometimes cannot be prevented. I wish to bring out three types of preventatives:
1. General Prevention

Just as information about proper nutrition can prevent all sorts of diseases, and just as warnings against the use of alcohol and drugs can prevent addiction, so it is also possible to provide some general prevention with respect to suicide. From a Scriptural point of view this requires us to point to the need for coming to know Christ, to live for Christ, and to find redemption from sin and also from suicide. The Gospel is the best prevention from despair.

This, however, is not sufficient. The Gospel must be a message within a communion (community) of saints. True communion of saints deals with the cause of suicide: loneliness. I believe that new and fresh emphasis needs to be placed on the importance of nurturing relationships in Christian marriage and family life. Another place to nurture true communion are in the Christian schools. Similarly, this should take place in the congregation.

Whenever the topic of death comes up, we must pay particular attention to current ideas about death-views which see death not only as an enemy, but also as a friend and where the argument is made that suicide is man's free decision.

2. Medical and Psychiatric Prevention

By this I mean medical and psychiatric help for those who are at risk with regard to suicide or attempted suicide. We should not merely say to such persons, "You think way too much; you should get to work and keep busy," etc. The opinion that those who talk about suicide most likely will not commit suicide is a dangerous misunderstanding. When loved ones are giving indication of thinking of committing suicide, please telephone their physician and possibly arrange for hospitalization in the psychiatric ward of a hospital.

By saying this, I do not mean to say that they do not need any pastoral and other non-medical help. On the contrary, a regular appointment with them, an encouraging smile, a question that reflects sympathy, patient listening to someone who wants to pour out his heart can relieve depression.

Lack of love to such people can be disastrous. A girl of thirteen years of age committed suicide and in a note left in her bedroom she wrote among other things: "I had everything I wished for except one thing: love." In brief, spending prime time with a loved one and medical therapy need to go hand in hand.
3. Prevention after attempt to suicide

I am referring to prevention in the occurrence of those who have attempted suicide, but whose attempt was aborted (unsuccessful). Also in this case medical expertise is necessary. But also needed, again, are the intensive efforts of the congregation as the communion of saints to encourage such a person. If the attempt of suicide has been a "cry for help," we need to ask: "Where have I failed in my Christian life as husband or wife; where have we failed in our Christian love as family and as congregation?" And we need to show what love is. At the same time I want to add that the community need not be informed about the reason for the attempted suicide.

Pastoral Help For Those Bereaved by a Suicide

If a loved one has committed suicide, then the bereaved loved ones need help. The process of their mourning is different from other bereavements. There is a wide range of emotions. Some survivors feel intense anger at the person who committed suicide; others experience remorse and guilt, struggling with questions such as: "Am I [are we] to be blamed for his or her death? 'Can I [we] ever get over this terrible happening in my [our] life [lives]?"

It is important to listen to these people as they express their emotions, without cutting them short. Painful and smarting happenings such as these need to be worked through and should not be simply shoved away or repressed. Also, if there are feelings of guilt on the part of the bereaved loved ones, they need to be taken seriously. Not every guilt-feeling can be traced to real guilt, but if there is guilt, it needs to be addressed. However, the final word should not be the guilt, but rather the grace which is in Christ Jesus. His grace alone can truly heal and save.

ENDNOTES


False perceptions of historical opinions need to be corrected. In his article "Did Early Christians Lust After Death," Darrel W. Amundsen with reference to Dr. Kevorkian cites the instance of the Michigan Circuit Court Judge Richard C. Kaufman, who relied on Alfred Alvarez's claim that the church's opposition to suicide was a late development. Amundsen gives detailed evidence of how Judge Kaufman's historical and theological perceptions were flawed by adopting Alvarez' definition of suicide as given by Durkheim, "whose broad sociological definition of suicide glosses over and distorts ethical, theological, and historical issues." Darrel W. Amundsen, "Did Early Christians 'Lust After Death'?: A New Wrinkle in the Doctor Assisted Suicide debate," Christian Research Journal Vol. 18, no. 4, Spring 1996, 12, 18.

K. Exalto, Geen hand aan uzelf. Gedachten over zelfmoord (reformatie reeks 6) (Kampen: Kok, 1982), 50.
K. Exalto, Geen hand aan uzelf. Gedachten over zelfmoord (reformatie reeks 6) (Kampen: Kok, 1982), 59, 60.
K. Exalto, Geen hand aan uzelf. Gedachten over zelfmoord (reformatie reeks 6) (Kampen: Kok, 1982), 63.

Also Aurelius Augustine (354-430).
K. Exalto, Geen hand aan uzelf. Gedachten over zelfmoord (reformatie reeks 6) (Kampen: Kok, 1982), 60.
Such as maniacs and those who are mentally deranged, small children and epileptics, "Zelf-doding," in Rondom de dood (Kampen: Kok, 1984), 61-115.
After I spoke on this topic to Office-Bearers in Ontario on March 28, 1998 some one responded to this point: It is conceivable that in some cases, the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit could be a part of suicide.
"Temptation here may be used in the sense of temptation to sin, but it seems to have the
broader sense of 'testing,' and to include trials of every kind," Leon Morris, The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 144.

Dr. L.W. Bilkes is an emeritus pastor in the Free Reformed Church. This article was previously printed in the December 1998 issue of the FRC Messenger and has been republished here with permission.