Cruzan case illustrates:

Differences between abortion and euthanasia are merely cosmetic

by Paul deParrie

The recent death of Nancy Cruzan took some pro-lifers off guard. Many had not considered the questions inherent in that particular debate because their attention was focused on the unborn. In fact, some even unwittingly accepted the premise for what was done to Nancy, that is, that such measures were acceptable if her condition were hopeless enough.

The right-to-die slogans have the same convincing ring as the first hearing of the pro-abortion rhetoric. And, just as with abortion, "complexities" are often used to cloud the central issue—the deaths of innocent people. These arguments warrant closer investigation.

Cruzan's case presents many—but not all—of the complexities often cited for ambiguity on the issue. One of the most profound is whether Nancy's life after the accident was "worth living." Nancy's father quickly decided that it wasn't and was prepared to direct a starvation death right away. The obstacle was part of the next issue—whether that was what Nancy' wanted. Her parents, after all, were no longer her guardians (an odd term to use in light of her death). Nancy was an adult and had never executed a "Living Will."

But the pro-lifer must look for the central beliefs in all this. Is there such a thing as a person created in God's image whose life is truly "not worth living?" Is our body "our own" that we may decide its fate? Clearly, much of the pro-death argument does not measure up to the ideals of Scripture. But what shall the pro-lifer answer to the complexities of medical decisions made today?

What is Innocent Life?

Scripture would indicate that no human being is innocent in the sense of sinlessness but that the term "innocent blood" in the Bible refers to those who are not guilty of an offense worthy of death. Under these auspices, anyone who deliberately kills an innocent human life is guilty of murder (war and capital punishment are another debate altogether). The cunning pro-death argument then moves to the question, who or what is "human?" A similar query is vaunted in the abortion debate. The answer is that "humanness" does not depend on age, stage, or condition. There are no "degrees" of humanity. Under pagan systems, people varied in value, but Scripture indicates that all people are of equal value—the rich, the poor, the genius, the profoundly retarded, the strong, the weak, all equal in God's eyes. No one is "useless" to God. God's Word mandates protection for them all.

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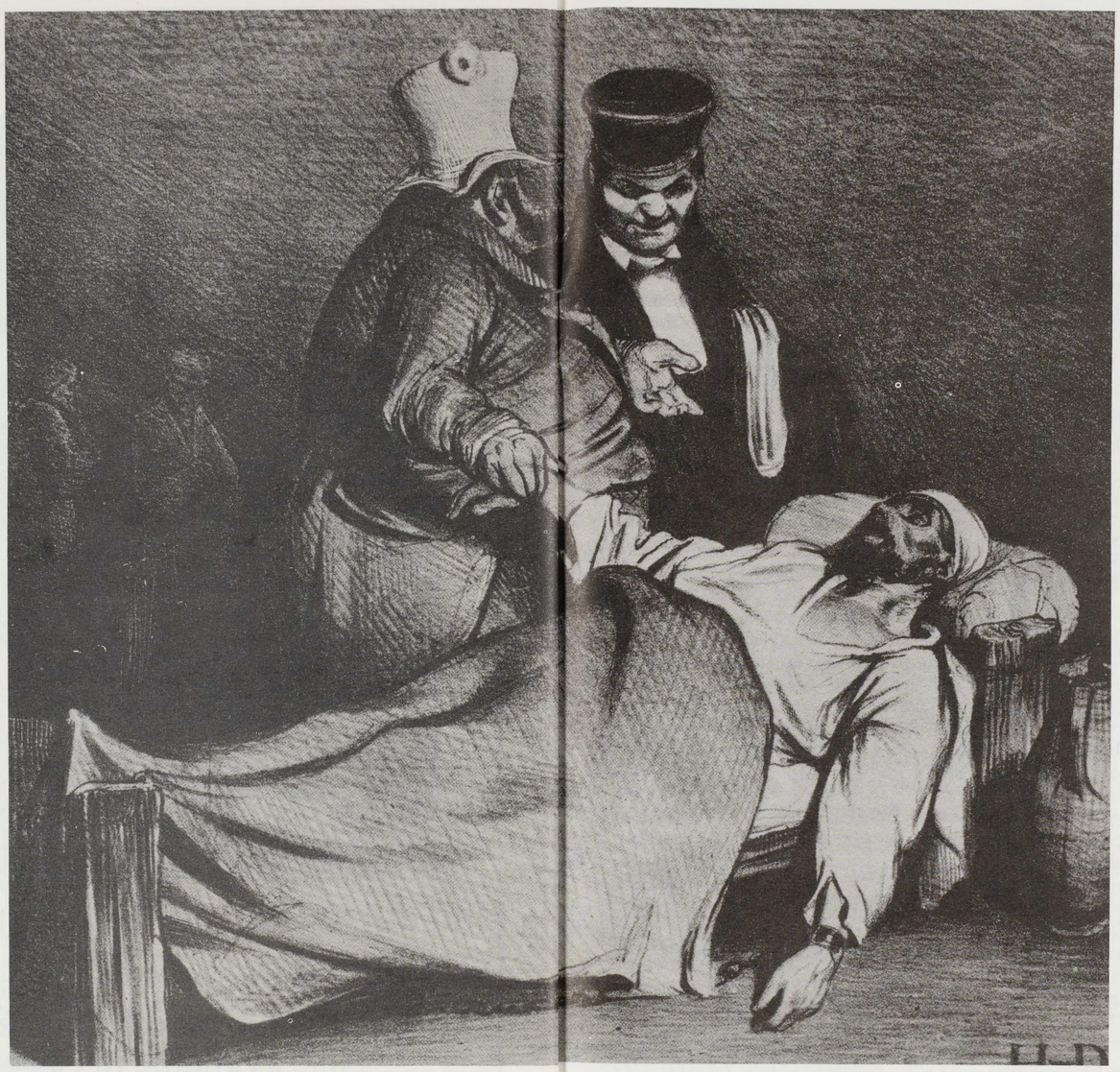

Protection: The Foundation of Medicine

Nursing care and medicine are founded on the principle that life has value and is worth preserving. This is an entirely Biblical precept. Passivity in the face of loss of life (or even property) is forbidden in Scripture—even the protection of a neighbor's livestock was commanded by law.

In the Western ideal, man is completely created in God's image—not just in some ethereal sense. The Body is just as much the *imagio Dei* as the soul and spirit. This makes the life and health of the body important enough to protect. Platonists, who see good only in the spirit, would as soon see the body die that the "real person" might attain the perfection of the spirit realm, but not so in Scripture.

Western medicine was founded on the principle that all lives were of value to God and that He alone had the right to end a life. Meanwhile, we were to extend and prolong life.

What About "All Those Tubes?"

No one knows what goes on in the mind of even the most deeply comatose. Nor does anyone know what value God derives from even the most "brain dead" people. Such judgments are beyond human ken.

Medicine cannot keep a dead person alive. They may be able to inflate the lungs in repeated succession and electrify the heart into yet another beat, but if the lungs do not oxygenate the blood, it is in vain. Scripture says that, "The life of the flesh is in the blood." This is more than spiritualized rhetoric. As long as the heart circulates blood that the lungs may oxygenate, the person is alive. A ventilator is merely an assistance to that process, just as crutches are an assistance to weak or missing legs. No one should kick crutches out from under a person.

"Artificial feeding" is a myth. If a tube makes feeding artificial, so does a spoon. Under this thought, a mother spoonfeeding her infant is artificial.

What If Someone Wants to Die?

Most people who say casually—even repeatedly—"I would not want to live that way" are not consciously saying "I would rather die than live that way." Generally they mean, "I would prefer not to live that way." The majority of people who reject "all those tubes" are not thinking in terms of the option being death—often slow and painful death.

Yet, even one who has thought it through is the equivalent of a suicidal person. His wishes should not be regarded as those of a completely competent person.

Those who call out for death in the midst of their sickness often are doing so because they feel obligated to "get out of the way" or despair over their helplessness. People like this need to be loved and treated with compassion—but not a killing "compassion."

What Shall We Do?

We must rescue. First, we should ensure that the seriously ill in our own circle are made to understand that they are wanted and needed. This will lower the likelihood of requests for death. Good nursing care will alleviate most pain and discomfort.

As to those like Nancy Cruzan, we must be more drastic. It will entail some going to court on their behalf in jurisdictions where the courts are sympathetic. Failing this, we may need to "adopt" some of these people and make sure they are fed and cared for. Often times there is no actual order to stop feeding, just a staff that does not allow sufficient feeding time. It may be necessary to take such cases on to visit and feed.

Underground Railroad?

However, when cases like Cruzan's come up our response may have to be much riskier. Some have suggested an "underground railroad" for these people to be smuggled to homes where they could be cared for. This would, of necessity, only be a life-saving solution for a few, but then the hiding of Jews in WWII was only for a relative few.

Naturally, this would also require people who are willing to be trained for such care, doctors who would risk licensure to assist, and countless other difficulties. But Christians have overcome great difficulties before to help the helpless and this situation should not, because of lack of prayer and imagination, go unattended. It took years before abortion clinic rescues developed their methods (and they are still developing according to the new circumstances), so we should begin now to seek guidance on what our response to Proverbs 24:11-12 will be to the Nancy Ellen Jobes' and the Nancy Cruzans who cry to God for help in their hour of distress.

[Art: Lithograph by H. Daumier entitled, "Set him free, he is no longer dangerous." ■