

POSITION PAPER

Suicide and the Sanctity of Life

Introduction

Few subjects require of the church a greater union of courage and tenderness than this one. Suicide reaches into congregations quietly and leaves behind a grief unlike any other, a grief mingled with confusion, guilt, anger, and a question that the bereaved are often too frightened to ask aloud. Where is my child now. Where is my husband, my sister, my friend. And beneath that question lies another, sharper and more cruel, planted there by centuries of careless teaching. Has the church already answered, and is the answer no.

The Way People Church believes that a subject of such weight must not be left to the improvisation of the moment. What a pastor says beside an open grave, what a counsellor says to a believer in despair, what a small group leader says when a trembling confidence is shared on a Tuesday evening, these things must not depend upon the temperament, memory, or theological instincts of whoever happens to be standing there. They must rest upon a settled position, biblically established and pastorally wise, held by the whole house.

This paper is that position. It speaks with conviction where Scripture speaks, and it keeps silence where Scripture is silent. It refuses to minimise the seriousness of suicide, and it equally refuses to declare what God alone has the right to declare. It sets out the church's convictions concerning the sacredness of human life, the sinfulness of the taking of it, the eternal standing of a believer who dies by suicide, the limits of the church's authority to pronounce, the care of the suffering, the comfort of the bereaved, and the conduct of the funeral.

The paper is written for pastors who will one day sit with a family in the worst week of their lives. It exists so that in that hour they will not be improvising.

The Sacredness of Human Life

The church's position begins where Scripture begins, with the doctrine of the image of God. The Pastoral Handbook affirms that humanity was created in God's image, and the Position Paper on Human Sexuality has already established that every human being therefore possesses inherent dignity, worth, value, and sacredness. That doctrine is not a decoration upon our anthropology. It is the ground of it.

Because every person bears the image of God, human life is not the property of the one who lives it. It is a gift held in trust. This is why Scripture surrounds human life with such protection, and why the sixth commandment stands as it does.

"You shall not murder."

Exodus 20:13 (NKJV)

The commandment protects the image-bearer from the hand of another. It also establishes the principle that the deliberate ending of a human life is a matter over which God, and not man, holds authority. The life of an image-bearer is sacred because of whose image it bears, and that sacredness is not diminished when the image-bearer is the one holding the decision.

Scripture speaks not only of the protection of life but of its origin. David, considering his own formation, does not describe an accident of biology but the work of God.

"For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, The days fashioned for me, When as yet there were none of them."

Psalms 139:13-16 (NKJV)

Two truths stand in this passage, and the church holds both. The first is that every life is authored. God formed the inward parts, covered the child in the womb, and wrote the days in His book before one of them came to

be. The second is that the psalmist knows himself to be known. God's eyes saw his substance while it was yet unformed. There is no season of a person's life, and no depth of their anguish, that lies outside the sight of the God who made them.

The church therefore teaches that life is to be preserved rather than ended, and it teaches this not as a rule imposed from outside but as the natural response of a creature to the God who fashioned him. To live is to hold in trust something that belongs to Another.

The Body Belongs to God

What creation establishes, redemption confirms. The believer's body is not merely a gift of creation but a purchased possession and a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.

*"Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?
For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's."*

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (NKJV)

Paul argues from ownership. You are not your own. The believer's body has been bought, and the price was the blood of Christ. The one who was purchased at such cost has no standing to dispose of what has been bought, and no right to destroy the temple in which the Spirit of God has chosen to dwell.

This is the strongest ground on which the church calls the despairing to live. The appeal is not made to willpower, nor to the feelings of others, nor to the shame of failure. It is made to ownership and to love. Your life is not yours to end, because it was not yours to begin with, and because the One to whom it belongs paid for it with His own blood. The church does not say to the suffering, be stronger. It says, you are not your own, and you are loved by the One whose you are.

Suicide and the Seriousness of Sin

The Way People Church holds that suicide is sin. It is the destruction of a life bearing the image of God, and it is contrary to the will of God for that life. The church will not minimise this, will not treat it as morally neutral,

and will not allow compassion for the sufferer to become indifference toward the act.

The tragedy of suicide is compounded by a particular sorrow. It leaves no opportunity for earthly repentance of that act. Other sins may be confessed, mourned, forsaken, and made right in this life. This one closes that door at the very moment it occurs. That is part of what makes it so grievous, and the church says so plainly.

There is a further grief. Suicide does not end with the one who dies. It wounds a family, a congregation, and often a generation. Children carry it. Spouses carry it. Friends carry a question they will never be able to answer. The church names this honestly, not to heap shame upon the dead, but because the truthful naming of harm is part of how a community learns to guard one another.

And yet the seriousness of the sin is not the whole of the church's doctrine, and it was never intended to be. Scripture nowhere teaches that the gravity of a sin determines the eternal destiny of a believer. Were it so, the gospel itself would collapse, for there is no believer whose sins are small. The question of eternal standing is not settled by weighing the sin. It is settled by the finished work of Jesus Christ, and to that we now turn.

Salvation Is Not Earned, and Is Not Forfeited by a Final Act

The Pastoral Handbook states the doctrine every pastor of this house must carry. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. We are saved by grace, sustained by grace, and transformed by grace. Scripture leaves no room for any other account.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

Ephesians 2:8-9 (NKJV)

If salvation is not of works, then it is not of works at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end. A salvation that could be earned by no deed cannot be forfeited by one. The gift that was never wages does not become wages at the last hour of a life.

Scripture is equally clear concerning how salvation is received, and concerning the breadth of the promise attached to it.

“that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.””

Romans 10:9-13 (NKJV)

The condition of salvation given here is confession and belief, not the manner of one's death. Paul attaches the promise to the one who calls upon the name of the Lord, and he attaches no asterisk to it. Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame. The church may not add a condition that the apostle did not write.

The believer's standing before God, once established, rests upon the finished work of Christ and not upon the believer's performance.

“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.”

Romans 8:1 (NKJV)

“For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.”

Hebrews 10:14 (NKJV)

One offering. Perfected forever. The sufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ is not partial, provisional, or dependent upon the tidiness of a believer's final hours. Reach, Lesson Three, has already taught this house that the grounds of the believer's assurance lie outside the believer, in God and in Christ, where no failure of theirs can reach.

From this a plain conclusion follows, and the church states it without flinching. If every unconfessed sin automatically condemned a believer, then no Christian could possess assurance of salvation. Believers die daily with sins they have not specifically confessed. They die mid-quarrel, mid-bitterness, mid-pride, with accounts unsettled and words unwithdrawn. If the final sin decided the eternal question, then no one would be saved, and the gospel would be no gospel at all. The sacrifice of Christ is sufficient for all who truly belong to Him, and it does not fail at the moment when the one who belongs to Him is at his weakest.

What Scripture Does Not Say

The church is bound not only by what Scripture teaches but by what it refuses to teach. Scripture nowhere states that every person who dies by suicide is automatically condemned to hell. It contains no such verse, no such principle, and no such warning. The doctrine that suicide is by itself damning entered the church from tradition, not from revelation, and it has been used for centuries to inflict upon grieving families a wound that God never authorised.

The Way People Church will not teach what Scripture does not say. The Position Paper on Last Things has already fixed the criterion of eternal separation, and it fixed it with care. Eternal separation from God belongs to those who reject His salvation. That is the biblical hinge, and it is the settled position of this house. Rejection of Christ is what separates a soul from God eternally. Despair is not rejection. A believer overwhelmed by anguish has not renounced the Saviour whom he loves and cannot at that moment feel.

The church accordingly rejects two errors with equal firmness. The first is the old verdict, which pronounces the suicide damned and sends a mother home from a funeral believing she will never see her son again. The second is the cheap grace which shrugs, which speaks of release and peace as though nothing grievous had occurred, and which leaves the sacredness of life unfelt. The first is cruelty dressed as orthodoxy. The second is sentiment dressed as compassion. Neither is the gospel.

A Distinction the Church Declines to Make

It is often asked whether the church will distinguish between a suicide arising from severe mental illness and a suicide arrived at by considered decision. The Way People Church declines this distinction, and it declines it openly.

The reason is not that the distinction is meaningless. The reason is that the church is not competent to make it. No pastor, counsellor, elder, or family member can enter the mind of another and weigh the degree to which illness, exhaustion, torment, or clarity governed a decision made in the last moments of a life. To attempt such a weighing is to claim a knowledge that belongs to God alone, and it would in practice produce a tribunal in which grieving families were required to prove that their loved one was ill enough to be forgiven. The church will not build that tribunal. It refuses the distinction not to flatten the moral reality, but because making it would

require the very pronouncement upon individuals that this paper exists to forbid.

The Limits of the Church's Pronouncement

There is one Judge, and the church is not He.

"For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son,"

John 5:22 (NKJV)

All judgment has been committed to the Son. Not some. Not the portion that the church finds too difficult. All of it. The eternal destiny of a human being is therefore a matter reserved to Christ, who alone knows the true condition of a person's heart, who alone sees what was believed and what was renounced, and who alone judges righteously.

From this the governing principle of this paper follows, and it is to be treated as the interpretive centre of the whole document.

The church may declare what is true of all who are in Christ. The church may not declare who is in Christ.

This principle cuts in both directions, and it is meant to. The church may proclaim, with full confidence and from the pulpit, that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, that the one offering has perfected them forever, and that no sin of theirs, including this one, can undo what Christ has done. That is doctrine, and the church declares it boldly.

What the church may never do is stand over a particular coffin and announce the verdict upon the one inside it. It may not say that this man is in hell. It may not say that this woman is in heaven. Both are pronouncements upon an individual, and both usurp the seat of the Judge. The church does not know, and it must have the honesty and the humility to say that it does not know.

This is not evasion. It is precisely the ground on which a family may stand. The church cannot give them certainty about their son, because no one can, and anyone who offers it is selling something God never gave. What the church can give them is the truth about the God to whom their son is now answerable, and the truth about the sufficiency of Christ for all who

are His. That is a firmer place to stand than a comforting lie, and it will bear weight for the rest of their lives.

The Care of the Suffering

Doctrine that does not become care has failed. The church therefore turns from what it believes to what it does.

There are believers in every congregation who are suffering in ways they have told no one. They sing on Sunday and endure the rest of the week. Some of them are leaders. Some of them are the very people others rely upon. The church must not assume that the presence of faith is the absence of anguish, nor that a believer in despair has stopped loving Christ. Elijah, under the broom tree, asked God to take his life, and God did not rebuke him. God fed him, let him sleep, and spoke to him gently.

The Way People Church therefore commits itself to a culture in which despair may be spoken aloud without penalty. A congregation in which suicidal thoughts cannot be confessed is a congregation in which they will be concealed, and concealment is where they become lethal. Leaders shall not treat such a disclosure as a scandal, a disqualification, or a failure of faith. They shall treat it as a wound, and they shall respond as those who are trusted with a life.

The church further affirms that the care of the suffering is not solely a spiritual undertaking. Anguish of this severity frequently has physical, medical, and psychological dimensions, and the church does not pretend otherwise. To pray for someone and send them away without help is not faith. It is neglect wearing the clothes of faith. The church will pray, and it will also ensure that competent professional help is obtained, and it will not regard the second as a concession to unbelief.

The practical obligations that follow from this are set out in Annexure A, and they bind pastors, counsellors, and small group leaders alike.

The Comfort of the Bereaved

To the family who has lost someone in this way, the church speaks carefully, because words spoken in such an hour are remembered for a lifetime.

The church does not tell you that your loved one is in hell. Scripture does not say it, and the church will not say it.

Neither does the church tell you that your loved one is certainly in heaven, because that too would be a pronouncement no one is authorised to make, and a comfort built upon a claim that cannot be sustained will fail you later, when you are alone and the words have worn thin.

What the church tells you is this. Your hope does not rest upon your ability to reconstruct the final moments of a life, nor upon speculation about what was thought or believed or cried out in the dark. It rests upon the character of God. He is perfectly just, and He will do no wrong. He is rich in mercy, and He does not despise a broken and contrite heart. He is perfect in wisdom, and He alone sees what none of us can see. You may entrust the one you have lost into the hands of a God who is more merciful than you are, and who loved them before you did.

And to those who carry guilt, believing they should have seen it, should have asked, should have answered the telephone, the church says plainly that the responsibility for a death does not transfer to those who were not there to prevent it. Grief will accuse you. The church will not.

The Way People Church's Position

The Way People Church believes:

- that human life is a gift of God, that every person bears His image, and that life is therefore sacred;
- that the body belongs to God and not to the self, having been created by Him and, in the believer, purchased at the price of the blood of Christ;
- that Scripture consistently calls for the preservation of life rather than its ending;
- that suicide is sin, gravely so, being the destruction of a life bearing the image of God, and that the church will neither minimise it nor treat it as morally neutral;
- that suicide leaves no opportunity for earthly repentance of that act, and that this is part of its tragedy;
- that salvation rests upon the grace of God received through faith in Jesus Christ, and never upon whether one particular sin was committed or confessed before death;

- that if every unconfessed sin automatically condemned a believer, no Christian could possess assurance of salvation, since believers regularly die with sins they have not specifically confessed;
- that the sacrifice of Christ is sufficient for all who truly belong to Him;
- that Scripture nowhere teaches that every person who dies by suicide is automatically condemned to hell, and that the church will not teach what Scripture does not say;
- that eternal separation from God belongs to those who reject His salvation;
- that only God knows the true condition of a person's heart, and that Christ alone is the righteous Judge;
- that the church may therefore pronounce no verdict upon any individual, in either direction;
- that the hope of the bereaved rests not upon speculation concerning a final moment, but upon the justice, mercy, and perfect wisdom of God.

We therefore reject the teaching that suicide automatically condemns a soul to hell, and we equally reject any teaching, tone, or silence that would minimise suicide or obscure the sacredness of human life. We entrust every soul to the perfect justice and mercy of God, while proclaiming that salvation is found in Christ alone.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to hold together two things that a frightened church has too often torn apart. The sacredness of life, which suicide violates. And the sufficiency of Christ, which suicide cannot exhaust.

The church that holds only the first becomes cruel, and adds condemnation to grief that is already unbearable. The church that holds only the second becomes careless, and loses the very ground on which it calls the despairing to live. The Way People Church will hold both, and will hold them in the same breath, because Scripture holds them in the same breath.

To the believer in the dark, the church says, you are not your own, you were bought at a price, and you are loved by the One who paid it. Stay. Speak. Let us help you.

To the family beside the grave, the church says, we will not pronounce upon your beloved, because we are not the Judge. But we will tell you who

the Judge is. He is perfectly just, abundant in mercy, and perfect in wisdom, and He may be trusted with the one you have lost.

And to the whole house, the church says what it has said from the beginning and will go on saying. There is one offering, and by it He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified. Christ is sufficient. He is sufficient for the living, and He is sufficient for the dead, and He is sufficient in the hour when a soul is at its weakest and least able to hold on. Our hope was never in the strength of our grip. It was always in the strength of His.

ANNEXURE A

The Pastoral Policy

This annexure gives practical effect to the doctrine established in the Position Paper above. It is issued as an annexure so that policy may be revised as circumstances require, without reopening settled doctrine. Where this annexure is silent, the body of the paper governs.

A1. Scope and Binding

This policy binds pastors, counsellors, and small group leaders alike. The first disclosure of suicidal intent is rarely made to a pastor. It is most often made to the person closest at hand, in a small group, after a service, or in a message sent late at night. Every leader in this house must therefore know what to do.

No leader is exempt on the ground that they feel unqualified. Feeling unqualified is the ordinary condition of everyone who receives such a disclosure. The policy exists so that the unqualified know exactly what to do next.

A2. Upon a Disclosure of Suicidal Intent

When a person discloses suicidal thoughts or intent, the leader shall:

- take it seriously, always, without exception, and without weighing whether the person is likely to act;
- remain with the person, and where there is immediate danger, not leave them alone and arrange for someone to be with them;
- listen without alarm, argument, rebuke, or the offering of quick solutions, and receive what is said as a trust rather than a scandal;
- not promise absolute secrecy, and not pretend that the matter can be kept between the two of them if a life is at risk;
- escalate to the pastors on the same day, without delay, and not wait for the next scheduled meeting;
- where there is immediate danger to life, contact emergency services first and the pastors immediately thereafter;

- make a brief written record of the disclosure and of what was done, and hand it to the pastors.

The leader shall not attempt to resolve the matter alone. Escalation is not a betrayal of the person's trust. It is the fulfilment of it.

A3. The Limits of a Leader's Competence

Leaders in this house are shepherds, not clinicians. The distinction is not a diminishment of spiritual authority. It is an honest recognition of the boundaries of a calling.

Accordingly, no leader shall treat suicidal ideation as a matter to be addressed by prayer alone. The church shall pray, and the church shall also secure qualified professional help. A leader who prays with a person in crisis and takes no further step has not discharged his duty of care.

The pastors shall maintain a current register of emergency services, crisis lines, and trusted professional practitioners to whom members may be referred, and shall review it at least annually so that no leader is left searching for a number in an emergency.

A4. Confidentiality and Its Limits

Pastoral confidence is sacred, and this house guards it. It is not, however, absolute.

Where there is a risk to life, the duty to preserve that life overrides the duty of confidence. Leaders shall say so plainly and in advance, in words such as these. I will hold what you tell me in confidence, but if your life is in danger I will involve those who can help you, because I am not willing to lose you.

Information disclosed in such circumstances shall be shared only with those who need it in order to protect the person, and with no one else. It shall never become the subject of conversation, prayer request, illustration, or announcement.

A5. The Prohibition on Means

No leader shall ask for, elicit, dwell upon, or repeat the means by which a person is contemplating, or has taken, their own life. No sermon, testimony, announcement, prayer, funeral address, or written communication of this church shall describe such means.

This restraint is a matter of care rather than squeamishness. Detailed description places the vulnerable at risk, and this document itself will be read by leaders who are carrying private sorrows of their own.

A6. The Care of the Bereaved Family

In the first days, the church shall be present rather than eloquent. Leaders shall go, sit, help with what is practical, and resist the urge to explain what God is doing. The family does not need a theology of suffering delivered on the first afternoon. They need the church to be in the room.

Leaders shall not ask the family what happened, shall not speculate, and shall not permit speculation in their hearing or in the congregation.

The care of a family bereaved in this way is not concluded by the funeral. The pastors shall ensure deliberate, sustained contact in the months that follow, with particular attention to the anniversary of the death and to the first Christmas, birthday, and other occasions on which absence is felt most sharply. Grief of this kind lasts longer than the church's attention usually does, and this house intends to be different.

Where children have been bereaved, the pastors shall ensure that their care is specifically considered and not absorbed into the care of the adults.

A7. The Conduct of the Funeral

The funeral shall proclaim Christ, comfort the grieving, and honour the life that has been lost.

No pronouncement upon the eternal destiny of the deceased shall be made from the pulpit of this church, in either direction. This is a standing prohibition and it binds every pastor and every guest minister. No minister shall declare that the deceased is in hell. No minister shall declare that the deceased is in heaven. The church has no authority to give either verdict, and a funeral is the very place where the temptation to exceed that authority is strongest.

The minister shall instead direct the family to the character of God, to the sufficiency of Christ for all who are His, and to the truth that all judgment has been committed to the Son, who judges righteously and who knows what we cannot know.

The manner of death shall not be described. The deceased shall not be reduced to the manner of their death. A life is more than its final hour, and the church shall speak of the whole of it.

Where the family requests that the cause of death not be mentioned publicly, that request shall be honoured.

A8. The Care of the Congregation and of the Pastoral Team

A death of this kind sends its grief through a whole congregation, and it can leave others who are silently struggling more vulnerable than they were the week before. The pastors shall therefore ensure that pastoral care is made visibly and easily available to the congregation in the weeks that follow, and shall preach and speak in a manner that opens the door to those who are struggling rather than closing it.

The pastors and leaders who carry the weight of such a loss shall themselves be cared for. Those who sat with the family, conducted the funeral, or received the first call are not exempt from grief by virtue of office. The house shall not permit its shepherds to carry this alone.

Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version® (NKJV®). Used for the doctrinal and pastoral ministry of The Way People Church.