

# 6th Death, Dying, and Living

For discussion on 2-20-11

## Introduction

John Frame (*The doctrine of the Christian Life*) gives a thought-provoking discussion of death (732-745). Interaction with Frame forms the final section on this commandment.

### I. Definition of death, biblically and medically

Death has three aspects: physical (dust to dust), spiritual (loss of fellowship with God), and eternal (permanent alienation from God). Abortion involves the physical death of children before birth. The sixth command speaks in the main to physical death.

How do we mark death? When does death occur? Biblically, life is marked by the giving of breath to man made from the dust of the earth, so, death occurs when we cease to breathe; it is marked by the “cessation of breathing.” This applies to both man and animal: **When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust** (Ps 104.29). There is a close bond between the terms breath and spirit in Scripture; thus, when He died, Jesus gave up His spirit or the breath of life. No one took His life from Him. He gave Himself in obedience to the very point of death.

By implication, cessation of breathing is a biblical criterion of death, but it is not exclusive: “it leaves the door open for advances in our medical understanding of death” (733). Medically, the “Uniform Declaration of Death Act” is the “standard”: “An individual who has sustained either (1) irreversible cessation of circulatory and respiratory functions, or (2) irreversible cessation of all functions of the entire brain, including the brain stem, is dead” (“Guidelines for the Determination of Death,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 246 (1981): 2184-86). Obviously, heart, lungs and brain are mutually dependent.

### II. Artificial means of sustaining the heart and lungs

Keeping some organs functioning despite brain death “should not lead us to question in these cases whether the patient is truly dead. Clearly a corpse does not become alive when we move its heart back and forth” thus, “Artificial life support may be a means of restoring natural function, but it does not replace that function, even for the purposes of determining death” (734).

On irreversibility: it depends on technology, so, medical science ought to seek ways to reverse presently irreversible cases. It has a subjective aspect: doctors are not always sure about reversing a loss of function.

### III. Letting die

Sometimes letting die cannot be avoided and it is not wrong (saving one drowning person and letting the other perish); other times it is the same as murder (withholding medicine that at the point of need). People may be on life support temporarily; to unplug the ventilator to let die would be murder. “In general, it is wrong to let someone die when we have the power to keep him alive.” However, there are modern complications due to technology that can keep people alive indefinitely.

#### A. A working principle

There is a difference between extending life and prolonging death. “Our principle must be this: we should never murder anyone, but neither should we prolong the process of dying” (735). Death is appointed because of the curse of sin; laudable efforts will ultimately fail. The attempt to extend physical life “is not an absolute priority of the Christian life.” People of faith risk their lives knowing that death is not the end but the entrance into glory. “That perspective should inform our efforts to preserve the lives of others” hence, “we must acknowledge that God is in control of life and death. So there will come times when we must give up our efforts to save lives and leave people in God’s hands (735), but when?