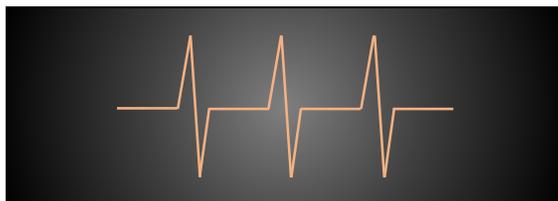


WHAT ABOUT TERMINATING LIFE SUPPORT?

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Preserving Life or Postponing Death?

This subject is one of conscience and decisions must be made based on the principles given in scripture even if scripture is silent on the specific instance under consideration. To examine the principles it is first useful to distinguish between **preserving life** and **postponing death**.

Preserving life means to provide the comfort, care, and sustenance needed to sustain life, regardless of the quality of life. (II Cor 12:9, Rom 5:3-5) Hardship and suffering do not provide license for terminating life. God alone numbers our days. (Job 14:5, Ps 139:16) and in the midst of hardship, we can turn to Him who is the God of all comfort for solace (II Cor 1:3-5).

God calls upon us to preserve life and to live life abundantly. He is the giver of life (Gen 2:7) and we have been made in His image. He doesn't ask us to postpone death. It is His task to determine our days (*cf* Eccl 3:2).

Postponing death, on the other hand is a different situation. It means employing extraordinary medical treatment with the hope of delaying death.

Under some circumstances, such steps are necessary, for example to allow doctors time to carry out further life-saving steps or to give the body time to begin its healing work.

Situations where a moral choice comes into it include when to terminate life support and when to refuse a burdensome medical procedure or treatment in order to avoid death. Human judgement plays a role in these moral decisions and begin with establishing when, according to our human judgment, God is calling the person out of this life. James

1:5 teaches us to ask God for wisdom in making these decisions.

This doesn't mean that when death is near we will withdraw all care. Hospice care organizations are skilled in making the end of life days of a terminal patient as comfortable as possible.

When it is clear that God is about to call someone out of this life within a relatively short period of time (hours or a few days) then we can, with good conscience, withdraw treatment that is only prolonging the process of dying. In so doing, we do not usurp the sovereignty of God rather we simply surrender to His divine decree. In doing so though, we must still provide basic physical care such as food and fluids (circumstances permitting) and ease pain with pain medications.

God wants us to use medicine wisely to prolong life. He also wants us to "let go" when it is clear He is bringing a person's life to an end. This is a subtle distinction and leaves room for declining a burdensome treatment to allow the natural passage of death.

A question worth asking is if this treatment is stopped, will the cause of death be from the cessation of treatment or will it be from the underlying condition? This is not always easy to determine but can help to distinguish between a treatment that preserve life and one that is simply postponing death. For example, in the case of someone who has no brain function, the respirator which maintains breathing may be removed even though this may result in the end of breathing. In such a case it appears that the person has already died or is on the verge of dying and that we

"Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life." - Rev. 2:10

are simply sustaining the body mechanically. The removal of the respirator is not the primary cause of death.

Another factor to consider in end-of-life care is our **motive**. Our reason for ending the treatment should never be to end the person's life. That responsibility lies with the Creator of life. He is the one who gives life and He is the one who takes life.

Ending a person's suffering is not a reason to end a person's life. There are many instances in life where God calls us to carry one burden or another and even to carry one another's burdens (Gal 6:2). That is part of His sovereign will.

Medicine and medical professionals are a gift from God and in recent years there have been amazing strides in medical science and we should avail ourselves of this blessing. A high view of life and a joy for living motivates us to take whatever measures are at our disposal to ensure a long life. It remains God's responsibility to determine the hour of our birth and death. We should never usurp that role. (Deut 32:39).

Medical science does not remove the reality that death is inevitable. As Christians we know that life does not end at death. In fact, through faith in the Lord Jesus, life after death is far more wonderful than life before death. But this is no reason to hasten our passage to glory. Rather it heightens the importance of ensuring that we have repented of our sins and placed our faith in the Lord Jesus (Mark 1:15) because no one knows when his life will be required of him (Luke 12:20).

A Living Will

In recent days, the so-called "Living Will" has become popular. This is a document that specifies how you want to be treated in the event of being incapacitated. Several options exist including "Do not resuscitate" clauses and instruction regarding food and water. Care must be taken in specifying "Do not resuscitate" to ensure that medical personnel may still intervene in a minor condition such as choking.

In drawing up a Living Will the guidelines given under "Preserving Life or Postponing Death" hold. It is not our role to determine when we should die, but we can leave instructions to preserve life and not postpone death. Choosing before-hand to withhold water and food falls too close to premeditated suicide to allow it as an option.

A Culture of Life

Remember, God commends a culture of life. He promises an abundant life simply because He loves us. Personal choice over the quality of life can not overshadow the fundamental truth of right and wrong? God commands, "You shall not murder" (Ex 20:13); stated positively, "Preserve life".

The present obsession with personal choice and rights has even confused some Christians. Our lives are not a right to control by our choosing, but a gift from God; a trust that we must guard for Him.

In all of these decisions our goal is to remember that God reserves the right to end a person's life. When faced with such decisions, we do well to seek His guidance and pray that His will guides our actions.

We want Him to control when we die because we've seen how much He loves us (John 10:10) when He allowed Jesus to die to deal with our sin. Our attitude must be that of the Psalm writer, *"I trust in You, O Lord; I say, You are my God. My times are in your hands"* - Psalm 31:14-15).

Resources

www.americanhospice.org

www.uslegalforms.com/livingwills

"Preserving life or postponing death" is based in part on comments by Pastor John Parlow, St. Mark Lutheran Church, Green Bay, WI.

A Prayer for Wisdom & Comfort

"Sovereign and all loving God, I bow in humble submission to You and ask for a special measure of wisdom in this present sad situation. You alone are the giver of life and You have numbered our days. Guide me to make the right decision with regard to postponing death.

Bring comfort and peace to my loved one at this time and comfort and strengthen to those of us who watch and wait for Your will to be done. This I pray in the name of the Lord Jesus who laid down His life that we may experience eternal life. Amen."

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"Seeking first His kingdom"

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