

ON NOT FEARING DEATH

by Frank C. Ellis, Jr.

Introduction

“Of all the wonders that I yet have heard, it seems to me most strange that men should fear; Seeing that death, a necessary end, will come when it will come.”¹ Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, delivering a line perhaps more appropriate to Marcus Aurelius, achieves a level of dispassion that many pretend to, but few, I suspect, actually achieve. Death is our enemy.² He is a defeated enemy, but as the song “Love Alone” by Caedmon’s Call recognizes, he still on a pretty long leash, for the hard fact is that since the fall, *it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.*³

In times past, death was a relatively straightforward affair.⁴ In an old family Bible, my great grandmother’s passing is rather dispassionately noted: “Took sick on September 3. Died three days later.” No doubt, her death certificate was not much more specific than that. In his book, *A Life Worth Living*, Dr. Robert Martensen tells that “Old age” was a valid official cause of death until a few decades ago. These days, however, things are different. Although many people today live well into their eighties (or even beyond), “nobody is allowed to officially die of old age.... Instead...one is obliged to die of something specific.... physicians must list a discrete diagnosis.”⁵ He then asks a valid question: “But if a person reaches his late eighties or early nineties, is not dying from old age good enough?”⁶

The Scriptures certainly seem to think so. *The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty*⁷ Moses wrote in his psalm. This, of course is not prescriptive,⁸ but it does seem to describe fairly well what the case actually is for human beings.⁹

Since this is all true—that life is short and then you die—how do we develop and practice an ethic of dying well? My concern here is not public policy (although, because we live in society with others, no pastoral discussion of end of life ethics can be sequestered from public policy). Rather, my concern is to look at how one can be a helpful and compassionate pastor of the flock of Jesus Christ, to follow the Apostle Peter’s command to *shepherd the flock of God that is among you.*¹⁰

¹ William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Scene II, act ii.

² 1 Corinthians 15:26.

³ Hebrews 9:27 (ESV; all Scripture references are ESV unless otherwise noted).

⁴ I do not mean that it was easy, or that it was not tragically felt. There just was not much to be done to postpone it, so it was generally faced head on.

⁵ Robert Martensen, *A Life Worth Living: A Doctor’s Reflections on Illness in a High-Tech Era* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 80.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Psalm 90:10a.

⁸ Deuteronomy 34:7 tells us that Moses *was 120 years old when he died. His eye was undimmed, and his vigor unabated.*

⁹ Martensen, 79 tells us that in 1600 in Berlin, someone who reached the age of 80 could expect to live six more years. In 1980, the same octogenarian living in Berlin could expect to live eight more years. Four hundred years of medical progress had purchased an additional two years of life. Of course, far more people were living to that age in 1980, but the question is about life span not about average length of life.

¹⁰ 1 Peter 5:2.

The Current Milieu

Earlier I said that no pastoral discussion of end of life ethics can be sequestered from public policy. Perhaps a better way to put it would be to say that the people whom we seek to serve are inevitably affected by the culture in which we live, and thus as pastors, we must take care not to avoid the issues present in our culture. Assuming that someone is in a church that takes the Bible seriously, he or she will be exposed to the biblical view of death. But, as VanDrunen notes, “Christians not only hear the voice of Scripture but also the voice of the broader, unbelieving world.”¹¹ He goes on to discuss the many and varied ways this unbelieving world insinuates itself into our thinking. Much of this insinuation occurs at the subconscious level. As a steak marinated in wine takes on a winey flavor, uncritical Christians marinated in the presuppositions of unbelievers take on the flavor of those presuppositions. Human emotions play a large part also. End of life issues can be truly tragic, truly devastating, and a sincere but incorrect application of the second great commandment (“Is this how I would like to be treated?”) can lead believers down all sorts of wrong paths. VanDrunen correctly concludes, “Christians often find it difficult to disentangle themselves from the perspectives on death that they imbibe from the surrounding culture, and thus we must be alert to the ways in which the world views death.”¹² I would only add that we must also be alert to the ways in which the world views people who are facing death.

How does the world approach death? Martensen argues vigorously that the vast majority of people want to approach it from the position of power and control. He admits that this is true of himself and of almost everyone he knows, both those in the medical profession and those who are suffering under life-threatening medical conditions. Commenting on this passion for power and control, he says, “Achievement of control has taken on the status of a moral and aesthetic imperative. It suffuses our relationships, our machines, our politics, our approach to nature, and, for those of us who are religious, perhaps our theology.”¹³ This imperative is clearly contrary to Christian thinking, and, while it is the responsibility of every believer to *take every thought captive to obey Christ*,¹⁴ it is the pastor’s job to equip and help believers to follow the biblical mandate.

The question becomes, then, how can pastors do this? What tools do we have to enable the men and women in our churches to *be transformed by the renewal of [their minds], that by testing [they] may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect?* VanDrunen suggests that we begin by helping them cultivate the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love. These can “help us avoid the way of foolishness.”¹⁵

¹¹ David VanDrunen, *Bioethics and the Christian Life: A Guide to Making Difficult Decisions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 171.

¹² *Ibid.*, 171-172.

¹³ Martensen, 53.

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 10:5.

¹⁵ VanDrunen, 176.

The Christian Virtues

The first Christian virtue is faith. But because it is a Christian virtue, the faith must be Christian faith. The world tries its best to replace Christian faith with its straw-filled totem, a “faith in faith.” But faith must have a worthy object, and only the Triune God, the creator and savior of his people, is the worthy object of faith. Faith, according to VanDrunen, “is the fount of the other virtues,”¹⁶ but it is more than the means to attaining other virtuous ends. Faith puts us in right standing before God; through it we recognize our creatureliness before our creator. In respect of death, faith allows us to see “beyond the gift of bodily life, [to] the Creator and Lord who alone has the right to dispose of His creation.”¹⁷ Faith forces us to face “the fact that natural life does not possess its right in itself, but only in God. The freedom to die, which is given to human life, is abused if it is used otherwise than in faith in God.”¹⁸

Indeed, I would argue that it is only through the virtue of faith that death becomes a freedom at all, for it is only those who are united to Christ by faith and baptism who rest from their labors.¹⁹ The Larger Catechism puts it marvelously well when it declares that “immediately after death [believers’] souls are then made perfect in holiness, and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies, which even in death continue united to Christ, and rest in their graves as in their beds, till at the last day they be again united to their souls.”²⁰ The fact of this, and confidence in that fact, is only attainable by faith. But how do believers cultivate this faith? Through the proper use of the ordinary means of grace, especially the Word read and preached, the Sacraments, and prayer. The ordinance of Anointing with Oil given to us in James 5:13ff is another means to that end.²¹ Earlier, I mentioned being marinated in the presuppositions of the unbelieving world. The ordinary means of grace are the antidote for that. VanDrunen asserts correctly, I think, that “there is probably nothing that better prepares people for death than being/becoming members of a faithful church of Jesus Christ where the Word that produces faith is proclaimed Sunday after Sunday.”²² It is not in the spoken word only that Christ is proclaimed, but in the tangible word as well: in his mercy, Christ ordained all the means of grace to encourage and strengthen the faith of his people. But faith does not stand alone; faith produces hope.

Like faith, hope must be Christian hope to be a Christian virtue. I may hope that it will not rain tomorrow, or I may hope that the stock market does well so that I can have a comfortable

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1955; Touchstone, 1995), 166.

¹⁸ Ibid., 166-167.

¹⁹ Revelation 14:13.

²⁰ *The Westminster Larger Catechism: With Scripture Proofs*. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1996), Question 86.

²¹ While this is not a sacrament, this is an ordinance of Christ delivered to the church—one of the “outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption” (Shorter Catechism 88). Much ink has been spilt asserting that the anointing with oil is merely some sort of medical treatment. While it is true that oil was used as medicine in the ancient world (and even today), it has never been used to treat every disease. Rather, I would argue that anointing with oil and the prayer that accompanies it is a concrete expression of the Christian expectation of everlasting joy in contrast to the everlasting mourning of those who die without hope (see Isaiah 61:1-3). This explanation is both simple and according to Scripture. The goal of the ordinance is not an extraordinary healing, but rather the assurance of God’s grace in a specific troubling situation.

²² VanDrunen, 177.

retirement. Neither of those is Christian hope. “Christian hope, founded in faith, looks ahead to Christ’s second coming and the resurrection of our bodies, awaiting them, not as possible but as certain and assured.²³ Just as faith allows us to lift our eyes from the earth to see the glory of God in the heavens, hope too lifts our eyes to see beyond the things of this life to see what awaits us.²⁴ And just as faith is cultivated by the preached word and sacraments, hope is cultivated by prayer. VanDrunen points out that prayer not only prepares us for death by building our hope, it is important in preparing those who are actively dying.²⁵ Often, it is the last thing that the dying can do, since it requires nothing but presence of mind.²⁶

The third and greatest of the Christian virtues is love: love for God and love for one’s neighbor. Regarding the matter under discussion, love for neighbor is perhaps the more evident. True love for one’s neighbor, however, is intimately connected with and flows out of one’s love for God.

Just as the world tries to fool us with fake faith and phony hope, it tries to fool us with a sort of counterfeit love for neighbor. This is a danger that believers must avoid. In his *Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, Robertson McQuilkin describes this counterfeit love as “mere tolerance, a warm feeling for everyone ‘out there’ or even special indignation for the oppressed in some distant place.”²⁷ The true Christian virtue of love, McQuilkin says, “must be for one’s neighbor—the person within reach. Anyone within reach, to be sure. But love as action must be for someone who needs what I have and can give.”²⁸ Truly, love is a verb,²⁹ and both McQuilkin and VanDrunen describe the many ways in which love acts. VanDrunen is particularly clear in how the lifelong practice of love within “a community of mutual dependence”³⁰ prepares one for death. He says,

The loss of independence is one of the great burdens that many people feel when they are seriously ill and dying. When formerly routine tasks...become impossible to accomplish independently in the last stages of life, people become completely reliant upon [others]....

The person who has cultivated the virtue of love for a long time and thus has learned both to give *and* to receive is much better prepared to face difficult periods of extraordinary dependence upon others.³¹

Of course, love is not just a means to this end; believers do not learn to love well simply so that they may learn to be dependent well. As McQuilken said, love is about doing for those who need what I have and can give. The Report of the PCA Heroic Measures Committee echoes this and carries it a step beyond, telling us that we must love one another well not only in prayers and in direct service, but also in the decisions we make about end of life care. Here too, the virtue of love plays a part. The Report says,

²³ VanDrunen, 177-178.

²⁴ Paul tells Titus that Christians are *to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ* (Titus 2:12-13).

²⁵ VanDrunen, 180.

²⁶ The grace of God is such that perhaps for the dying, not even that is required in any way that we would recognize.

²⁷ Robertson McQuilkin, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1995), 17.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Consider 1 Corinthians 13. In his description of love in that chapter, Paul uses 16 Greek verbs to describe what love does. He uses not a single adjective to describe what it is.

³⁰ VanDrunen, 182. Dependence of any sort is not well-beloved in the world.

³¹ Ibid., emphasis original.

Surveys have shown that most people want limited treatment for themselves when there is no real hope of recovery. Yet, when called upon to make decisions for others, they frequently want more for others (usually close relatives) than they would do or want done for themselves. *Love for our neighbor means that in proxy decision-making, we should apply the same Biblical standards of justice, mercy and faithfulness to others that we want and expect to be applied to ourselves*³².

VanDrunen focuses on the broad scope of love and reminds us that “the virtue of love compels us to care for the dying in every way possible.”³³

Caring in love for those nearing the end of life has become increasingly difficult, as care of all kinds has become highly institutionalized. Jay Adams argues that the very institutions that we have built to improve care have in some ways prevented pastors, church members, and families from doing things that can and ought to be done. His comparison of the death of Jacob to a typical modern day death in an institution is stark:

The dying Jacob gathers his children round him and speaks to each about his future. Contrast that with the most common mode of dying, in which the father and husband disappears from the scene as a deceived, doped, deluded and despairing person—dying alone without a parting word on his lips for anyone. Everyone is separated and alone; no one can reach through to touch or hold. There is little to carry away but doubt, regrets, unresolved problems and a gnawing sense of guilt over the grand deception.³⁴

Although his arguments may be dated in some of the particulars,³⁵ the general sense is not far from the mark.

Conclusion

Although physical death is an evil, it is, as the PCA Committee report points out, “is a relative evil in a fallen world.”³⁶ Death is an enemy, but it is a defeated enemy, and believers in Christ need not fear it. God in Christ has given us not only the victory over death in eternity, he has given us the means to die well in this life. Pastors who are accountable to the chief shepherd ought then to ensure that their flocks make use of those means as together with all creation *we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies*.³⁷

³² Report of the Heroic Measures Committee Presbyterian Church in America, in *PCA Digest Position Papers*, vol. 2, ed. Paul R. Gilchrist. (Lawrenceville, GA: Presbyterian Church in America, 1993), 383, emphasis added.

³³VanDrunen, 183. But we must be careful not to confuse caring in every way possible with doing everything possible. The PCA Position paper is quite clear on this: “Christians of any age who have chronic incurable illnesses and a limited life expectancy may ethically refuse ‘heroic measures’ rather than briefly prolong a life which God is clearly drawing to a close. The elderly who have lived their normal expected life span and desire to die quietly may choose not have extensive medical measures. Their wishes may be difficult to ascertain, so elders and pastors may need to inquire in a sensitive manner to know this important and necessary information.”

³⁴ Jay E. Adams, *Shepherding God’s Flock: A Handbook on Pastoral Ministry, Counseling, and Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 131.

³⁵ For instance, I have worked in hospitals for over 30 years, and, in my experience, the incidence of patient deception is near zero. Looking at his argument in a different way, where the virtue of love is absent, the impersonality and isolation of end of life care can be used to console consciences that really are guilty. People are conveniently prevented from doing what they really have no desire to do in the first place.

³⁶ PCA Committee Report, 380.

³⁷ Romans 8:23b.

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