

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus

Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska

26 April 2014

Human Dignity and Euthanasia: A Biblical Perspective

One of the most fundamental of all biblical propositions is that humans are created in God's image: That humans both resemble God (e.g., attributes such as intellect, emotion, will) and represent God (i.e., as His theocratic stewards, Gen. 1:26ff) provides the basis for the worth, value and dignity of humanity. Theologian Albert Mohler writes: "Human dignity can survive only if we commonly believe and commonly affirm that every single human being, at every stage of development, is a person in God's image and bearing the dignity that is the mark of God's personal possession. The only adequate conception of human dignity rests upon the biblical teaching that such dignity is not a human achievement, but a gift. Human beings do not achieve the status of dignity by their abilities or performance or development. Human dignity and the worth of the human individual are predicated only upon the fact that every human being is made in the image of God, and therefore is to be respected, protected, and cherished as a member of the human community." In this Postmodern era, American civilization is currently struggling with how to affirm human dignity without the biblical premise of humans bearing God's image. This effort is not going well, for without absolute truth rooted in God's revelation, we are finding that as a civilization we have our feet firmly anchored in midair! We have no absolute, all-encompassing basis for establishing and affirming human dignity. Further, with the Darwinian hypothesis now the widely accepted view, humans are merely products of exactly the same force that produced all life—natural selection. According to this model, our closest biological relatives are the primates (more than likely the chimpanzee). Thus, life is a product of vast amounts of time, random chance and an impersonal force called natural selection; life is a "cosmic accident." If human beings are simply another more developed primate and a cosmic accident anyway, then why does it matter how we treat human life at any stage in its development?

We see this confusion and tension in how research is progressing in both reproductive and genetic technologies. In unprecedented ways, we are empowering parents to decide the kind of children they want. And technologies such as preimplantation genetic diagnosis raise the ugly possibility of eugenics, a horrific thought in light of the Holocaust and Josef Mengele's eugenics experiments in Nazi Germany. This confusion and tension are also informing the difficulty in distinguishing the value and worth of humans versus animals. Obviously, one would think, humans are always more valuable than animals. But Peter Singer, leading ethicist at Princeton, argues that, depending on your criteria, pigs may be of more value than humans. He has also argued quite passionately that, under certain circumstances, infanticide could be justified. This confusion is also seen in the ongoing, persistent struggle we have in America over abortion. Since 1973, America has determined that a child has no value and no legal protection until it is outside its mother's womb. Killing it is acceptable because it has no value until it exits the womb. Further, any right to life that the child has is surrendered to the mother, whose right to abort her child trumps the right of that child to life. Confusion!!

Without the ethical anchor of humans as God's image bearers, where does civilization begin its thinking? It has no starting point.

Francis Schaeffer, noted 20th century Christian apologist, argued that if you wish to know what will be happening in America in ten years, look to western Europe today. In some ways, he was correct. This absence of any criteria for determining human dignity and worth is evident in euthanasia practices in western Europe. Consider Belgium, which recently became the first nation in the world to remove any age restrictions on euthanasia. In cases where there is "unbearable and irreversible suffering," children should have the same right as an adult to ask to "die with dignity." This decision by the Belgium parliament amended the 2002 euthanasia law, by declaring that a child of any age can be helped to die, but under strict conditions: He or she must be terminally ill, close to death and deemed to be suffering beyond any medical help. The child must also be able to personally request euthanasia and demonstrate an understanding of the choice. A team of doctors, psychologists and other caregivers will then assess the case before the final decision is made, pending parental approval. Assisted suicide is permitted under certain conditions in Switzerland, Germany and parts of the United States, but it is only in Belgium, Luxemburg and the Netherlands where doctors can actively end a patient's life, usually with an overdose of sedatives. In Luxemburg, the minimum age is 18, while in the Netherlands it is 12.

How popular is doctor-assisted suicide in these European nations? In the Netherlands, for example, the number of its citizens who were killed by euthanasia rose by 13% last year, to a total of 4,188. One reason for this increase, some believe, is the introduction of mobile euthanasia units permitting patients to be killed by voluntary lethal injection when family doctors refuse to provide the needed injection. According to Bruno Waterfield of the *Telegraph* newspaper, "around 80% of people who request euthanasia die at home and are killed by doctors on the grounds that they are suffering unbearable pain and are making an informed choice. The opinion of a second doctor is required."

As a Christian, I find these developments in western Europe repugnant. This is not about human dignity; it is stepping away from this bedrock standard of civilized life. Furthermore, it defies comprehension that doctors would sanction such practices. Former psychiatrist in chief at Johns Hopkins Hospital writes: "The reasons for opposing . . . doctor-assisted suicide never went away. The reasons have been with us since ancient Greek doctors wrote in the Hippocratic oath that 'I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody if asked for it nor will I make a suggestion to that effect.' The oath is a central tenet in the profession of medicine, and it has remained so for centuries." Indeed, Dr. Leon Kass, former chair of President Bush's Bioethics Commission, wrote on the Hippocratic Oath that "Medicine and surgery are not simply biological procedures but expressions, in action, of a profession given to helping nature in perpetuating and enhancing human life. The doctor is the cooperative ally of nature not its master. It should not need saying, but the exercises of healing people and killing people are opposed to one another." For that reason, the hospice movement, especially the Christian hospice movement, provides what the advocates of euthanasia can never do—death with dignity. The Christian hospice movement manages pain through drugs, ministers to the person through Scripture reading and the singing of hymns, thereby preparing the saint for heaven. Hospice care preserves human dignity even at the end of life. As McHugh writes,

“The doctors, nurses, and social workers committed to hospice care demonstrate how an alliance with nature [i.e., with God] at life’s end plays out in just the way that the medical profession intends.” Human dignity is therefore preserved and maintained, something of eternal significance to our God.

See Paul McHugh in the *Wall Street Journal* (25-26 May 2013); Bruno Waterfield in www.telegraph.co.uk (26 September 2013); Charlotte McDonald-Gibson in www.world.time.com (17 February 2014); and Albert Mohler www.albertmohler.com (25 February 2014).