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## Is human dignity a Biblical term?



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## Is human dignity a Biblical term?

The term “human dignity” is not found in the Bible.

Reflections on human dignity originated after the Second World War. In the light of the massacre of the Jews, people started reflecting on the question: Do all people possess a basic dignity that cannot be taken away from them?

The slogan displayed at the gate of a Nazi concentration camp read: “To each his due”. Within the frame of reference of that time, concentration camps and gas chambers were regarded as a fate that Jews deserved.

May we think about people in this way? Is this the way in which the Bible talks about people? Is this how God feels about people? Are there people who, because of their race, culture, religion, nationality, economic ability, social status, bodily reality or whatever category, are so despicable, unworthy, inhuman, that they do not deserve to be treated with the same respect as other people?

Although the Bible does not use the term “human dignity”, the Bible constantly reminds us how God’s righteousness and justice has to be shown to the “poor”, the “stranger”, the “orphans” and “widows”.

Throughout the Old Testament, and in the entire ministry of Jesus, we notice that people, who had no value or dignity in the eyes of society, were deemed worthy by God.

When Jesus touched unclean, unwelcome and undignified people – lepers, a woman who suffered from bleeding, children, and a man with a deformed hand – and when He included them into the community of faith, He thereby declared their God-given dignity to all.

The most surprising and significant aspect of the story of the Bible is that God became human in Jesus of Nazareth! The incarnation is the good news that Jesus is Immanuel: God with humans!

Another surprising twist, one that we can hardly contemplate, is the fact that Jesus’ body rose from the dead and ascended to heaven. That means that humanity is with God for eternity!

It should, however, not be such a big surprise, considering that at the beginning of the story of the Bible, in Genesis 1:27, we read, “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

Psalms 8 praises God as the Creator of heaven and earth, and declares: “...what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honour.”

Seen in this light, the Bible – from Genesis to Revelation – speaks about the God who values all human beings despite all their faults, brokenness and shortcomings. But you can easily read over it if the Spirit does not open your eyes to see it.

Throughout the history of the Church, it has been this way – in the struggle against slavery, colonialism and apartheid – it was not Bible studies that opened the Church’s eyes to recognise and resist injustices, but the encounter with the person who was being treated unjustly.

It was only when the Spirit opened believers’ eyes to see the image of God in the rejected person, the likeness of Christ in the “least of these” (Matthew 25:40), that they started reading the Bible with new eyes and it dawned upon them that, from beginning to end, the Bible speaks

about the God who has mercy with the downtrodden, who brings justice for the wronged, and who sets the slaves and the captives free.

### **Is human dignity reformed or humanistic?**

The Reformers rediscovered the complete grace of God, with particular reference to the way it is described in the letters of Paul. As a result, they felt compelled to cleanse the Church of all human efforts to measure their justification and sanctification (their dignity in the eyes of God) against their own achievement or good works, their status or position in the Church or state, or their ability to make financial contributions as penance for their sins.

Both our justification and sanctification are completely the work of God through pure grace in Jesus Christ. Human beings cannot add any value to their worth in God's eyes, since it is Jesus Christ who justifies and sanctifies us through his work of reconciliation.

The Reformation went hand in hand with the awakening of humanism. Reformers like Luther and Calvin did not regard humanism and Christianity as opposites, but they pointed out that humanism had its limitations.

One of the fathers of humanism, Desiderius Erasmus, who was a committed Christian, was in constant debate with Luther. He was of the opinion that Luther took the Reformation of the Church too far. Erasmus continued to acknowledge the authority of the pope and argued that humankind's free will, and ability to do good were not destroyed by sin.

According to Luther, Erasmus did not go far enough in acknowledging and describing God's abundant grace towards humankind. His teaching on "faith alone" insisted that people were incapable of doing any good out of free will, and could only receive God's grace through faith. Compared to the humanists, the Reformers wanted to express God's abundant grace and respect for each person in much stronger terms in the Church and in society.

By translating the Bible into German so that every believer could read it, and by teaching that each believer is a priest of God, Luther, in his acknowledgment of the dignity of all human beings, went much further than Erasmus.

The teaching of the *corruptio totalis* – the total corruption of humankind – should not be interpreted as a negative anthropology. Instead, it is precisely the proclamation of the good news that humanity is incapable of doing anything deserving of God's respect, but that God honours and respects all human beings as an act of pure grace.

Calvin, who was not a theologian but a lawyer by profession, understood that God's grace for humans had to find expression in the structures of society. That is why he worked so hard at transforming every aspect of the society in Geneva.

It was not enough to preach God's glory on Sunday's. God's glory had to be visible in each part of the city.

Calvin's motto was *Soli Deo gloria*: To God alone all the glory! And according to Calvin, God is glorified where people flourish. God is glorified in a community wherein the image of God in people, the glory of Christ that radiates from people, continually increases through the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is also significant to remember that a quarter of the population of Geneva were refugees, of which Calvin was one.

Those who were displaced, who had lost everything, who possessed nothing of value, nothing they could pride upon or use to win the respect of others – these were the people with whom Calvin shared the good news that God chose them out of pure grace, and not by virtue of any human category or status.

Today, humanity is confronted with other questions than the questions of the Reformation. Or perhaps the issues are similar, but verbalised differently. People are challenged by issues like economic injustice and inequalities, sexism and racism, sexuality, disabilities and HIV/AIDS, global warming and ecological sustainability.

But still Martin Luther's question remains: "Where will I find a merciful God?" The Church that is always busy reforming, must continually ask herself: How should we act if we confess that Jesus Christ descended into human beings' deepest wretchedness and suffering, to bring restoration and wholeness to all of humanity and the whole of creation?