

# HUMAN DIGNITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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## **Abstract:**

In a world marked by turmoil and social unrest, the definition of human dignity and human rights is a valid question. However, both dignity and human rights have a solid foundation and come with responsibilities in order to be enjoyed. The foundation for human dignity and human rights is the relationship between man and his Creator. The responsibilities that come from human dignity and human rights are the relationships of people with their Creator and with others. In this article both aspects, the foundation and the relationships, will be covered from a Christian perspective.

**Keywords:** *God as the Creator, human behavior, human dignity, human nature, human rights*

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## **Introduction**

In a world marked by turmoil and social unrest, the definition of human dignity and human rights is a legitimate question. Everywhere in the world, people are fighting for their dignity and rights on both sides of the barricade. Sometimes they are clashing or even injuring each other in the name of the same dignity and human rights. The confusion is even greater when everybody claims to have a monopoly on the truth.

However, dignity and human rights do not originate out of thin air, nor do they come without responsibilities. To understand the great value of human dignity and human rights, some definitions and clarifications are needed. Both dignity and human rights have a strong foundation and some responsibilities. The foundation for human dignity and rights is found in understanding human nature and her Creator. Human responsibilities are the relationship of the humans with their Creator and the behavior of humans towards themselves and each other. In this article both aspects, the

foundation, and the relational responsibility, will be covered from a Christian perspective.

The article is divided as follows: the Creator and human nature are described. This is followed by the relationship of the creation with her Creator, and the behavior of the creation with its positive and negative influence on human dignity and human rights. In the conclusions section, the author will present some lessons learned from the study.

## The Creator and the Human Nature

The author of this article believes that God is the Creator of the universe, so He is the Creator of humankind. Regarding belief in God, the western world is generally divided into evolutionists and creationists. This division is not primarily created by scientific evidence but by philosophical differences and the way those views affect the interpretation of the scientific evidence. Evolutionism is based on two philosophical aspects: naturalism and materialism. Naturalism maintains that nature is all there is and that the universe exists on its own. Therefore, it is self-sufficient without a supernatural cause or a Being that is sovereignly in control. Materialism declares matter as the original cause of all, as a self-created thing without any other “unseen” aspects. Materialism denies the existence of the soul. The philosophical assumption of evolution is therefore essentially atheistic or agnostic. Evolutionists do not believe that God exists. Unfortunately, according to John W. Whitehead, evolutionism “denies the worth and dignity formerly attributed to people created in God’s image, and it relegates human beings to the realm of the animal world.”<sup>1</sup>

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, creationism is “the belief that the universe and the various forms of life were created by God out of nothing (*ex nihilo*)...biblical creationists believe that the story told in Genesis of God’s six-day creation of all things is literally correct and that the Earth is only a few thousands years old, as extrapolated from the biblical genealogies that begin with Adam, the first man.”<sup>2</sup>

1 John W. Whitehead, *Truth Under Fire*. Crossway Books, Wheaton IL., 1998, p. 141.

2 <https://www.britannica.com/topic/creationism>, 27 May 2021. Accessed 4 September 2021

J. B. Stump, the general editor of the book *Four Views on Creation, Evolution, and Intelligent Design*<sup>3</sup> writes in the Introduction of the book: "I am using 'creationist' as the one who believes God is the creator."<sup>4</sup> So the philosophical difference between evolutionists and creationists is the belief in the existence of God as the creator of the material world. Evolutionists have an atheistic or agnostic philosophy, and creationists have a biblical worldview in which God is not only the Creator but also the Sustainer of life and the universe.

However, God does exist despite human belief or unbelief. As Creator, God shared some of His attributes with His creation, humankind. These attributes are seen in human nature. Unfortunately, people who dismiss God from their philosophical worldview do not fully enjoy the benefits of being created in His image. Their dignity and rights are diminished from the start.

In the Bible, human nature is presented as the image of God in humanity, as described in Genesis 1:26-27: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'" While the biblical meaning of the image of God must be foundational to any proper understanding of the *imago Dei*, this diversity of interpretations within Scripture does not supply a definitive understanding of the precise meaning of the image of God. According to Erickson, there are three general ways to view the nature of the image of God: substantive, relational, and functional.<sup>5</sup>

The most dominant view throughout the history of Christianity is the **substantive view**. This view defines the image of God as some essential characteristics or qualities at the essence of human existence which reflects the divine nature in some way. In the substantive view, the image of God is what humans *are*, because God created these inherent characteristics within humankind. Although conferred by God, the image exists in humans whether they recognize God's existence and His work or not. Jeremia

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3 Ken Ham, Hugh Ross, Deborah B. Haarsma & Stephen C. Meyer. *Four Views on Creation, Evolution, and Intelligent Design*, Stanley N. Gundry, series editor and J. B. Stump, general editor. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2017.

4 *Idem*, p. 12.

5 Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd Ed. Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2000. pp. 517-536.

Rusu describes the *Imago Dei* as the internal human structure that makes God's image in man: the spiritual component of a person's personality: his thoughts, will, and emotions.<sup>6</sup>

The **relational view**, endorsed by modern theologians, presents the image of God as the experiencing of relationship. When the relationship is active, meaning humans are believers in God and followers of Christ, humans can be said to be in the image or to display the image of God. However, defining the image of God by the relational view seems to limit its universality. It is not clear how those who have no relationship with God, those who are rebellious against God or ignorant of God, could reflect His image. This contradicts the biblical witness that all people have the image of God innately within them.

The **functional view** has recently increased in popularity. "This is the idea that the image is not something present in the makeup of the human, nor the experiencing of relationship with God or with fellow humans, but the image consists in something one does. It is a human function, the most frequently mentioned being the exercise of dominion over the creation."<sup>7</sup> So, in this view, the image is to be understood not so much ontologically as existentially: it comes to expression not in the nature of man so much as in his activity and function. This function is to represent God's lordship to the lower orders of creation. The dominion of man over creation can hardly be excluded from the content of the image itself.

## The Creator-Creature Relationship

Other theologians try to combine two or more of these views about the image of God in humans. However, many theologians and bible interpreters do not think that the biblical context of Genesis 1:26-27 is sufficient to define what it means to be created in the image of God. They interpret the image of God from the New Testament perspective in which Christ restores the image of God in man through His salvific work on the cross. More than this, many bible scholars agree that Christ is the perfect or true image of God. He is the second Adam (1Cor. 15:45), who restores the corrupted or distorted image in man; this happens when he is regenerated and

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6 Jeremia Rusu, *Bazele biblice ale dogmaticii creștine după Evanghelie*, Ediția a II-a, Editura Risoprint, Cluj-Napoca, 2019, p. 155.

7 *Op. cit.*, p. 527.

sanctified through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. So, besides his origin as a created being by the Almighty God, through the work of Christ on the cross, man gets the true dignity and the rights he deserves as a recipient of God's special attention and work.

Before exploring the benefits of accepting God as the Creator, it is important to recognize that in the world is characterized by relativism; absolutes, like God as the Creator, are not accepted anymore. When absolute moral values are presented, a multitude of counter positions rise not only to counter argue but to attack. Veith recognizes that "debate over moral values has erupted into 'cultural war' that splits political parties, school boards, and even churches... it destroys a common ground for argument or persuasion."<sup>8</sup>

To illustrate this "cultural war" Veith gives the example of the debate between a pro-lifer and a militant pro-choicer:

Appeals to Biblical morality, to the constitutional right to life, to scientific facts about the development of life in the womb, to the brutality of abortion techniques—these objective issues carry no weight with people whose worldview allows for no external absolutes, who accept no moral criteria beyond a woman's arbitrary choice, or who uncritically accept the orthodox feminist party line.<sup>9</sup>

In this author's view, this attitude degrades human dignity and limits human rights for unborn children, women, and healthy families. On the other hand, a biblical worldview has at its center God as the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe. God's plan and laws are there to protect the human race and maintain the dignity and rights He has given humanity.

Surprisingly, sociologists and psychologists do not see the value for humanity of recognizing the image of God in man. However, theologians emphasize this value and the benefits of a good relationship between the creature and her Creator. In his *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Wayne Grudem writes:

It would be good for us to reflect on our likeness to God more often. It will probably amaze us to realize that when the Creator of

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8 Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL., 1994, p. 147.

9 *Idem.*

the universe wanted to create something “in his image,” something *more like himself* than all the rest of creation, he made us. This realization will give us a profound sense of dignity and significance as we reflect on the excellence of all the rest of God’s creation: the starry universe, the abundant earth, the world of plants and animals, and the angelic kingdoms are remarkable, even magnificent. But we are more like our Creator than any of these things. We are the culmination of God’s infinitely wise and skillful work of creation. Even though sin has greatly marred that likeness, we nonetheless now reflect much of it and shall even more as we grow in likeness to Christ.<sup>10</sup>

In conclusion, human dignity and human rights have their origin in God as the Creator and in the relationship of man with his Creator. However, the image of God in man did not disappear after the fall, as Jeremia Rusu observed, but it was gravely distorted. However, God prepared a means for the salvation of man, by sending Jesus Christ, the true *Imago Dei*, to save people and restore the image of God in those who believe in Him, the Savior of the world.<sup>11</sup>

## The Behavior of Man

Humans can enhance their likeness to God by developing their moral sense through studying the Scriptures, prayer, and letting the Holy Spirit work out holiness in their lives. This should be visible in man’s relationship with God but also to his fellow citizen as well, as God’s image bearer. Grudem speaks of the profound implications this has on our conduct toward others, “It means that people of every race deserve equal dignity and rights.”<sup>12</sup>

The Reformers and other recent theologians, describe the image of God in man as relational or interpersonal in nature. Craig L. Blomberg affirms that “as the image of God is increasingly perfected in redeemed humanity, persons are unable not only to relate adequately to God but also to

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10 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 449.

11 Jeremia Rusu, „Identitatea creștinului – baza conduitei creștine”, in Runcan, Patricia & Remus Runcan (Eds.), *Puterea de a fi altfel*, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 2014, pp. 131-139.

12 *Op. cit.*, p. 450.

other people.”<sup>13</sup> Blomberg uses Exodus 34:6-7<sup>14</sup> as his biblical basis. There he finds an extensive but not exhaustive list of the qualities which include the image that God creates and recreates in man. There are seven qualities people should express towards their family members and their neighbors in their relationships. These seven transferable qualities are:

### *Mercy*

The Bible describes God as merciful (Ps. 86:15; 119:156; 145:8; Luke 6:36). Speaking to Cornelius, Peter describes Jesus' mercy as "He went about doing good" (Acts 10:38). Man should follow Jesus' example. Besides being emotionally compassionate, a merciful person is active in meeting others' needs and tries to influence others who could help the needy. However, mercy should be balanced and motivated by real needs, not wants. For example, if someone doesn't want to work and provide for his family and is looking for people just to help him, he should be helped to find a job not to take advantage of people's generosity and mercy. Another example can be taken from the family life: children should be taught to have high moral values and learn to work from an early age, not to receive everything without any responsibility from their part. In this way they will grow without being spoiled and lazy.

### *Grace*

In Psalm 86:15 God is described as "a God merciful and gracious," and in Psalm 112:4-5 the Psalmist praises the advantages of a person who is gracious with those around him, out of respect for God. In the presence of a gracious person, people feel at peace. They feel seen and accepted. On the other extreme is the pharisaic attitude in some cultures where people show hypocritical face-to-face graciousness, but critical or dishonest behind one's back. True grace is when an outsider is welcomed and made to feel at home in a new place and even new culture.

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13 Craig L. Blomberg, "The Image of God in Humanity: a biblical-psychological perspective," *Themelios*, Vol. 18-Issue 3. Retrieved September 18, 2021.

14 The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." (ESV, 2016).



*Slow to anger*

God is very patient with people about their sin, giving them time for repentance and change. An example is the patience of God with the Assyrian city of Nineveh, which repented after the prophet Jonah predicted its destruction. God was “gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abundant in self-giving love” (Jonah 4:2). Jesus was also patient with his disciples when they thought he did not run the kingdom in the right way; he taught them and corrected them, but He did not send them away for not understanding Him and His motives.

In family relationships, parents should follow God’s example by being patient with their developing children. Many intergenerational conflicts would be eliminated if the parents stop condemning their children who are recognizing parental selfishness and hypocrisy and fight back. People should also have an attitude of patience when seeking to understand other cultures. This requires time and humility, not condemning something simply because it is different from our experience. However, patience and understanding must be placed in the context of moral and legal obligations of society. Similarly, parents need to set healthy boundaries for their children at the various stages of child development.

*Abounding in steadfast love*

In her history, Israel rebelled against God numerous times. Despite her sin, God continued to love Israel, even when He had to punish her—which also reflects His love for Israel. In Proverbs God’s wisdom is personified and declares, “I love those who love me, and those who diligently seek me will find me” (Proverbs 8:17). John describes that Jesus loved His disciples even when He was going to die on the cross, “Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that his hour had come that he would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (John 13:1). Jesus also prayed for His enemies when he was on the cross. By His teaching and actions, the Lord included loving His enemies even unto death.

The example of God and Christ should be followed by man in all settings, family, and social relationships. In relationships with enemies, man should also follow Jesus’ loving example. The author of this article understands that loving your enemy is not a natural response. However, it is part of what it means to be made in the image of God. Those who



call themselves followers of Christ are especially called to live like Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

### *Abounding in faithfulness*

Other translations use the word “truthfulness” for “faithfulness,” as a fulfilment of promises and curses under the covenant.<sup>15</sup> God is faithful to His commitments in creation and salvation. In Romans, the Apostle Paul encourages the believers to trust in His promises to complete the development and full restoration of Christ’s image in their lives, “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His promises. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son...” (Romans 8:28-29)

Talking on the human attitude towards truth and faithfulness, Blomberg sees that many times people do not imitate God and His faithfulness:

We, however, often yield to cultural pressures, motivated by personal narcissistic choices, and so we lie and fake wholesome living. Some cultures train people to lie more cleverly than do others, even though persons in all cultures want to know the truth. In Japan, for example, there is much lying, especially to superiors, under the guise of courteously telling them what they want to hear, even as the ideal remains to know someone truly or ‘inwardly.’ Codes of honour among thieves, as among Mafia clans, reflect the universal desire of people to experience the truth and the reality that no one can function well without being able to trust someone. History under numerous Communist regimes was regularly distorted or fabricated; post-Communist cultures now reflect the immense hunger for truth, including spiritual truth, which this vacuum created. The entire complex Western economy functions on the basis of certain levels of trust in commitments. Marriages disintegrate without faithfulness. However, ‘if we are faithless [Christ] is faithful, for he cannot deny himself’ (2 Tim. 2:13).<sup>16</sup>

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15 Brown, D., Fausset, A. R., & Jamieson, R. (n.d.), *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments: Genesis–Deuteronomy* (Vol. I, pp. 415–416), London; Glasgow, William Collins, Sons, & Company, Limited.

16 Craig L. Blomberg (2021). “The Image of God in Humanity: a biblical-psychological perspective,” *Themelios*, Vol. 18-Issue 3. Retrieved September 18, 2021.

This fallen image of humanity can be restored by people remembering that they are created in God's image and have the right and the duty to live as faithful, truthful men and women.

### *Forgiving all kinds of evil*

In Exodus 34:7 the ESV Bible translation describes God as “forgiving iniquities and transgressions and sin.” The essence of God is to forgive the repentant of all categories of evil, so these three terms are not to be separated or considered mere repetitions of the same idea. Brown et al. assert that “They describe different phases and shades of evil—guilt, transgressions, trespasses—sins committed both against God and man—sins of a moral as well as positive nature.”<sup>17</sup> The multidimensions and nuances of evil shows the grandeur of God's forgiveness and the immensity of His love for mankind.

On the human side, Jesus clearly taught in and after “the Lord's prayer” that receiving forgiveness was directly correlated with forgiving others, “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors... For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions” (Matt. 6:12, 14-15). Jesus even offered forgiveness to His persecutors and enemies (Luke 23:34). Following Jesus' example, man can and should forgive his opponents, and even pray for them. However, the Bible teaches that there are times and places when forgiveness must be withheld, especially when it is unrelentingly spurned (Matt. 18:15-18). But those are exceptions, not the norm.

### *Practicing justice*

The second part of Exodus 34:7 states that God “... will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.” This highlights God's justice in regard to punishing unrepentant sin. God, however, is also completely omniscient and just—He is fair in all his dealings with man. A superficial reader of the Old Testament sometimes concludes that God is primarily judgmental in His dealings. They doubt the existence of a just

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17 Brown, D., Fausset, A. R., & Jamieson, R. (n.d.). *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments: Genesis–Deuteronomy* (Vol. I, pp. 415–416). London; Glasgow: William Collins, Sons, & Company, Limited.

God because they do not see his patience and forbearance. Closer examination, however, reveals that His punishment of the unrepentant, and even the delaying of discipline, arises from His love.

However, it may take generations for God to execute His justice. Unfortunately, the sins of the parents are transmitted and increased in the lives of their children, and every generation, without repentance, will continue to decline morally and spiritually. If this moral and spiritual decay continues, God will bring His judgment to the rebellious generations. If people from one generation repent of their sins and their parents' sins, God is a God of second chances. He will bring healing and forgiveness to that generation.

Christians are to be just and fair in their roles and responsibilities as parents and spouses. They must not take vengeance into their own hands; only God is the Judge (Heb. 10:30). Instead, they must love their neighbors, and show compassion and care. In this way some of their enemies will change their wrong attitude and make restitution for their past injustices.

## Conclusion

In a world marked by turmoil and social unrest, defining human dignity and human rights is a valid question. Everywhere in the world, people are fighting for their dignity and rights on both sides of the barricade. Sometimes they clash and injure each other in the name of the same dignity and human rights. The confusion is even bigger when everyone claims to have exclusive ownership of the truth.

However, both dignity and human rights have a solid foundation and some responsibilities. Knowing, accepting, and applying the foundation will help humanity to fully benefit from the special status that people have. The foundation for human dignity and rights is understanding the relationship between human nature and her Creator. From a Christian perspective, God is the Creator, and He shares some of His transferable qualities with humanity, His creation. These qualities are spiritual, cognitive, affective, and volitive.

Human responsibilities are the relationship of humans with their Creator and the behavior of humans towards themselves and each other. Some important traits that God has shared with humanity are mercy, grace, patience (slow to anger), abounding love and faithfulness, forgiveness, and

practicing justice. Following God's example, man should start imitating the Creator, first in the most intimate circle, as a spouse, parent, and child in his or her family. However, these traits must also extend outward to others such as neighbors, colleagues, fellow citizens, and even enemies. The godly qualities one is called to display in the family must extend outward to larger social circles. This attitude does not come easily, so a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as the true image of God, is needed to make this transformation in people's hearts.

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