

CREATION, KNOWLEDGE, AND SALVATION: THE FOUNDATIONS FOR HUMAN DIGNITY AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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Abstract: Human dignity and religious freedom are two God-given blessings for humanity. In this article the author asserts that from theology, especially bibliology, it is evident that God created humanity in His image, and this gives man dignity. God also allowed man to choose responsibly and exercise his freedom. The second argument is that God gave humanity knowledge, and this brings dignity and religious freedom in people's lives. And thirdly, God designed the Plan of Salvation to restore man's dignity and give humanity true religious freedom, the freedom to worship the Lord.

Keywords: Creation, Human Dignity, Knowledge, Religious Freedom, Salvation

Introduction

Human dignity and religious freedom are two of the most important human rights, not only from man's perspective but also from God's perspective. In this article the author will present human dignity and religious freedom based on three foundations: creation, spiritual knowledge, and salvation from sin to new birth, or birth from above. Theology, especially bibliology, provides examples and illustrations for these three foundations. Using theology the author will provide doctrinal argumentation and illustrations how God's plan for humanity impacted people in all three aspects presented.

Creation—The Foundation for Human Dignity

“In the beginning God” are the first words in the Bible (Gen. 1:1). The author of this article believes that God is the Creator of the universe, the earth and everything on it, including people. A piece of art gets its value from its artist. For example, *The Night Watch* is a painting by Rembrandt. It is considered to be the most valuable painting produced by the great Dutch artist although he painted more than 600 paintings. Many art critics consider that Rembrandt painted himself in the middle of the painting, behind a man in the green and a guard with a metal helmet, showing only his eyes and his well-known beret. In Creation, God is the Great Author. He created man and by His involvement in creation, man has value, both in dignity and in freedom.

When God created man, He gave a much fuller representation than Rembrandt. The Dutch master gave a hint at his presence in his great work, but God “created man in His image, both male and female.” (Gen. 1:27-28). The Bible mentions that man and woman have been created in the image and likeness of God in only three passages in the early chapters of Genesis (Gen 1:26-28; 5:1-3; 9:6). This is what theologians call *Imago Dei*, in the image of God. This status makes man “unique among the creatures in that he is like God and therefore able to have communion and fellowship with God.”¹ God also gives man dominion over the animal creation. The moment man became a living creature, he was the image of God, both male and female. Animals, fish, and birds do not share this privilege. In other words, man is unique in every aspect of his existence because, not only part of man or some faculty of man are in the image of God, but all of man is made in the divine image. This complex problem has created different theological theories. Ieremia Rusu states,

Theologians have elaborated many theories concerning the significance of the phrase “in God’s image and likeness”: the structural theory, or the substantive view; the relational theory; the functional theory; and the representation theory. The substantive theory identifies the image with a certain characteristic of physical quality, a psychological or a spiritual one, that belongs to man.²

1 N. Shepherd (1988). Image of God. In *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Vol. 1, p. 1017). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

2 Ieremia Rusu (2018). The Relationship between National Unity and Imago Dei. In *Jurnalul Libertatii de Constiinta (Journal for Freedom of Conscience)*, Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru and Dragos Musat Eds., Editions IARSIC, Les Arcs, France, Vol. 6/2, 2018, pp. 263-272.

Imago Dei gives man the position of dignity and responsibility of representing God on earth. “The image of God” in man is evident primarily in man’s spirituality because God is Spirit and He does not have a physical body. The structural theories identify *Imago Dei* in man with some psychological or spiritual qualities like reason, free will, or a supernatural skill given by the Spirit.³ Brunner and Barth explained *Imago Dei* as a relationship with God. For Brunner, the Word of God is the key that changes the man into God’s image. In the third stage of his meditation, Barth said that the image of God is more than the vertical relationship of man with God; it also includes horizontal relationships with other people. To those qualities, Grudem adds,

moral aspects: accountability to God; an inner sense of right and wrong; and behavior that is holy and righteous before Him,
spiritual aspects: a spiritual life that enables us to pray and praise Him and hear Him when He talks to us; and immortality,
mental aspects: reason and think logically; use of complex, abstract language; awareness of the distant future; creativity in art, music, literature, in scientific and technological inventiveness; and complexity of emotions, and
relational aspects: ability to relate to God; and to each other in our marriages and families; ability to relate to the rest of creation.⁴

In his *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem also describes the great dignity we have as bearers of God’s image,

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 ever more as we grow in likeness to Christ...Every single human being, no matter how much the image of God is marred by sin, or illness, or weakness, or age, or any other disability, still has the *status* of being God’s image and therefore must be treated with the dignity and respect that is due to God’s image-bearer. This has profound implications for our conduct toward others. It means that elderly people, those seriously ill, the mentally retarded, and children yet unborn, deserve full protection and honor as

3 Millard J. Erickson (2000). *Christian Theology*, 2nd. Ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, p. 438.

4 Wayne Grudem (1994). *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, pp. 445-448.

human beings. If we ever deny our unique status in creation as God's only image-bearers, we will soon begin to depreciate the value of human life, will tend to see humans as merely a higher form of animal, and will begin to treat others as such. We will also lose much of our sense of meaning in life.⁵

In conclusion, our human dignity is given by our Creator, and the grace He gave us to be His image-bearers⁶.

Knowledge of Truth—The Foundation of our Freedom

As a follower of Christ, the worldview of this article's author is based on the Bible. The Bible is unique in many ways. In his book, *Think Like Jesus*, George Barna gives four reasons why the Bible is unique,

First, it claims to be God's direct revelation to us regarding His values, principles, and expectations. Second, the words in the Bible come directly from God—written by people who were specifically directed by God in relation to the content. While the personality, background, and context of each author is evident in what he wrote, the substance was from God. Third, because these are the words of a deity who is always truthful and accurate, the content represents truth for humankind. Finally, Scripture is authoritative because it presents *God's* words to us—that is, they are the words of One who reigns over those whom He has created and whose commands are to be carried out precisely as He intends.⁶

Since the words of the Bible are God's words, and since God cannot lie, it is correct to conclude that there is no untruthfulness or error in any part of the words of the Bible.

Knowledge is the foundation of human freedom.⁷ The Lord Jesus Christ told His disciples that they will know the truth and the truth will make them free (John 8:32). He was not referring to intellectual knowledge, although this is very important as well. He was referring to

5 Wayne Grudem (1994). *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, pp. 449-450.

6 George Barna (2003). *Think like Jesus*. Brentwood, TN: Integrity Publishers, p. 151.

7 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru (2013). "Adevărata libertate sau slobozenie", în Daniela Ioana Bordeianu, Erika Androne, Nelu Burcea, *Manual pentru liderul Departamentului de Libertate religioasă*, Casa de editură "Viață și Sănătate", București, pp. 234-238.

moral knowledge, knowing God through Jesus Christ. In his commentary on the Gospel according to John, Carson writes,

If we are to know God, neither rationalism nor irrational mysticism will suffice: the former reduce God to mere object, and the latter abandons all controls...The Word, God's very Self-expression, who was both with God and who was God, became flesh: he donned our humanity, save only our sin. God chose to make himself known, finally and ultimately, in a real, historical man.⁸

When The Lord Jesus said, "the truth will make you free," He meant that the gospel, the good news of salvation, will give His followers true spiritual and religious freedom. Carson provides this insight on Jesus' statement,

Because the truth's intimate connection with Jesus, true disciples must not only hear his words: they must in some sort be united with him who is the truth. Judaism taught that study of the law makes a man free; the Fourth Gospel insists that the law points to Jesus (5:39, 46), himself the truth (14:6) and the one who is full of grace and truth (1:14) if true freedom is to be enjoyed.⁹

Reading those words, some may think that Jesus, being himself the truth, knew everything even in His incarnation. This is not the case. According to J.I. Packer,

The God-man did not know independently, any more than He acted independently. Just as He did not do all that He could have done, because certain things were not His Father's will (see Matt. 26:53 f.), so He did not consciously know all that he might have known, but only what the Father willed Him to know. His knowing, like the rest of His activity, was bounded by His Father's will. And therefore the reason why He was ignorant of (for instance) the date of His return was not because He had given up the power to know all things at the incarnation, but because the Father had not willed that He should have this particular piece of knowledge while on earth, prior to His Passion.¹⁰

8 D.A. Carson (1991). *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., p. 127.

9 D.A. Carson (1991). *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., p. 349

10 J. I. Packer (1973). *Knowing God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, p. 55

Jesus had complete freedom, but He used it to give it to be fully obedient to the Father's will. From Packer's remarks, we understand that true knowledge that gives freedom is not complete or full knowledge, but knowledge according to God's will. Understanding this principle will help each of us to learn from God and apply this knowledge to live a free life in His presence. In this way our freedom will help us grow and fully develop in the man or woman He wants us to become. Even more so, the freedom we receive as a result of knowledge in accordance with God's will help us learn how to worship and enjoy religious freedom.

Salvation—The Foundation for our Human Dignity and Spiritual Freedom

The last foundation for human dignity and religious freedom is the salvific work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Erickson said that "the doctrine of salvation encompasses a large and complex area of biblical teaching and human experience."¹¹ In the following paragraphs the author will present only the effects of salvation on human dignity and religious freedom. Christ died to remove the effects of sin, that is, guilt and condemnation. Thus, forgiveness, redemption, and reconciliation are the major results.

In order to understand the dimension of this wonderful work of salvation, we should remember that the human condition is total depravity. According to Erickson, the fact of total depravity is not that "humans are as wicked as they can possibly be, but rather that they are utterly unable to do anything to save themselves or to extricate themselves from their condition of sinfulness."¹²

Sin brings guilt into man's heart. Because of this, man needs deliverance from guilt, he needs forgiveness. Samples explains the way God brings forgiveness of sins to people,

Through Christ's crucifixion, suffering, and death, God's just wrath against sin is satisfied and appeased. That death on the cross extended both divine grace and mercy to sinners. Grace gives what one does not deserve (forgiveness and righteousness), while mercy does not give what one does deserve (the just

11 Millard J. Erickson (2000). *Christian Theology*, 2nd. Ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, p. 942

12 *Ibidem*, p. 821

wrath of God). Christianity is a religion characterized by the importance of redemption (being forgiven and reconciled through Christ).¹³

The second major result of salvation through Jesus' death on the cross is redemption. In the Old Testament, only God is the Redeemer. Elwell and Beitzel write that, "When the redemptive concept is applied to God as the subject, he delivers—without the payment of a price—by his mighty power (Ex. 6:6; Dt. 15:15)."¹⁴ Christians believe that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Redeemer imagery Old Testament. God liberated humanity from the bondage of sin through Jesus's death on the cross. He is the only One able to provide redemption and thereby "redeem" us out of that bondage. "When we speak of redemption, the idea of a 'ransom' comes in view. A ransom is the price paid to redeem someone from bondage or captivity,"¹⁵ writes Grudem. Christ's redemptive work is for the whole world, but only the one who believe in Jesus Christ as the Only Savior, will be freed from the bondage of sin and find favor again with his redeeming God.

Another major result of Christ's salvation is reconciliation. Reconciliation is God's way of bringing errant man back into a relationship with Himself. Through reconciliation, man's hostility towards God is removed. Erickson specifies that "the emphasis in Scripture is usually that we are reconciled to God, that is, he plays the active role; he reconciles us to himself."¹⁶ The main word for redemption, *katalassein* (Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor.5:19), "signifies the reconciliation of God with the world, expressing God's initial change of heart toward sinners...The point of the reconciliation is that God for Christ's sake now feels toward sinners as though they had never offended him."¹⁷ The sinners can learn about this good news only from the Bible, and the church should proclaim this

13 Kenneth Richard Samples (2007). *A World of Difference: Putting Christian Truth-claims to the Worldview Test*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, p. 103

14 W. A., Elwell & B. J., Beitzel (1988). Redeemer. In *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible* (Vol. 2, p.1828). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

15 Wayne Grudem (1994). *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, p. 580

16 Millard J. Erickson (2000). *Christian Theology*, 2nd. Ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, p. 832

17 W. A., Elwell & B. J., Beitzel (1988). Reconciliation. In *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible* (Vol. 2, p.1823). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

good news, “the message of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19). Everyone who listens and accepts, through faith, this wonderful message will experience renewed life and a real peace with God (Rom. 5:1-11).

At the end of their article, Elwell and Beitzel make a sobering warning,

When this great objective truth of God’s reconciliation with sinners—the gospel available for acceptance by faith—is altered or cut down, the result is always the same. People seek to reconcile God through some sort of self-transformation, self-redemption, works-righteousness. Such pseudo-reconciliation is doomed to fail and to fall under God’s judgment.¹⁸

This warning should be taken seriously because a wrong attitude toward God’s only way of salvation could jeopardize not only human dignity and religious freedom, but also his eternal destiny.

Conclusion

Human dignity and religious freedom are two God-given blessings for humanity. In this article the author presented the three foundations for human dignity and religious freedom. First, it is evident that God created humanity in His image which gives dignity to the man. God also allowed man to choose responsibly and exercise freedom.

The second argument is that God gave man knowledge, and this brings dignity and religious freedom in people’s lives. And thirdly, God designed the plan of salvation to restore humans’ dignity and give them true religious freedom, the freedom to worship the Lord. By giving man His forgiveness, rescuing us from our sin, and making peace between us and God, the Lord has restored us. He has given us the dignity of living free from sin and able to serve the Lord through the power of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸ W. A., Elwell & B. J., Beitzel (1988). Reconciliation. In *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Vol. 2, p.1825). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

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