

On Human Dignity and the Christian Church

How does the concept of human dignity relate to the Christian church in general and to the ministry of the local congregation in particular? Can it serve as a theological principle to guide or affect the everyday ministry of the pastor or the mutual ministries of the members of the church? How can or should it affect the way people relate to each other? How can or should it affect the mission of the local church to people outside or beyond the church? At first glance, such questions appear easy. Who could be against human dignity? But a close reading of Professor Ismael Garcia's inaugural address, "On Human Dignity," complicates the matter tremendously.

On the face of it, it would seem obvious that the church would want both to acknowledge and to encourage human dignity, both to recognize and to teach it, to uphold it and to seek it. It would seem obvious that the church would want to treat its members and its neighbors with respect and common human decency. Of course we would want to do all that, and much more. And therein lies the question. As we look at this particular project on human dignity, as we look at this particular program and proposal and attempt to consider how and whether it might be of use or help in the local church, we must raise certain questions: On what grounds would this concept of dignity be introduced? For what purpose would it be promoted? To what end or effect would it tend? How would it relate to the gospel? Would it be helpful or not to the cause of Jesus Christ?

Garcia begins his address with the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. He rejoices that "the language of human rights has established itself as the moral language of all peoples of the world," though one would have to ask whether all peoples have a moral language and, if so, whether they use this one. Moreover, Garcia regards "the fact that the language of human rights" is "normative for defining how humans ought to be treated" as "a momentous historical achievement, and one worth while celebrating." That is his starting point. He does not begin with scripture. He does not begin with the Christian faith. He does not begin with our theological heritage. He does not begin with the life of the church. He begins with the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. That is what he celebrates. And that tells us something from the beginning. This entire project rests upon thoroughly secular and political concepts.

I do not recall the language of human rights forming a significant part of the scriptural witness or of the theological heritage of the Reformed church. Nor do I recall that it is the business of the church to be celebrating human historical achievements. I do remember that God has given us a number of commandments, which we are expected to obey. I do remember that God has given us a number of promises, the fulfillment of which we receive as gifts (not as rights which we can demand). And I do remember that God has given us a Son who suffered and died and was raised again in order that we might be forgiven and live, which is to say that God has accomplished for us that which we could not and cannot accomplish for ourselves. The language of rights and achievements is not helpful in the church. In fact, it is less than not helpful. It is destructive and misleading. We live by grace alone.

Garcia next turns to a discussion of human dignity, which he takes to be "the foundational concept" behind the discussion of human rights. That is, his interest in human dignity is as a prop to advance the overriding cause of human rights. The better we understand and promote this underlying dignity, he seems to be saying, the more prevalent and secure said rights will be. Again, who could be against human dignity? But, we have to ask, what is the

source, the origin, the meaning, and the significance of this term? Why should we import an alien concept into the church, especially when the whole aim of the secular language is to define reality apart from any reference to the God and Father of Jesus Christ and apart from any Christian language of the church?

I do not recall the language of human dignity, either, forming a significant part of the scriptural witness or of the theological heritage of the Reformed church (there is that passage in Habakkuk 1:5-11 about the “dignity” of the dread Chaldean warriors who come for violence and whose own might is their god, but presumably it is not that dignity about which Garcia speaks). In fact, a great deal of our history might be understood to have to do with the lack of human dignity, the failure of human dignity overreaching itself into pride, the failure of human dignity wasting away into sloth and avarice, and so forth. Perhaps the fall should be understood as the loss of dignity. And then the gospel would have to do with what God does for us in this regard, not something that we have in our selves or do for ourselves. It is not that we are opposed to human dignity. It is just that the whole current language of human rights and human dignity is an attempt to say that human beings have value in and of themselves, apart from any reference to God, while we say that human beings have value because God values us. This makes all the difference in the world. Many others have already noted that, apart from God, human beings have no value. That is, the language of human rights and human dignity is a desperate and failing attempt to do something it cannot do: shore up the value of human life without reference to God who is beyond human life. So, why would the church want to bring into the church and use such language and concepts which are intended to belittle and to destroy the faith of the church?

Perhaps some examples would be helpful. Garcia heralds dignity as “a radically egalitarian concept.” This suggests that its value should be immediately obvious to all of us. But why is this so? It may be so, not because of our religious heritage, but because the current, prevailing political ideologies say it is so. The Bible says that men and women were made in the image of God, and it also acknowledges that we have widely varying abilities and responsibilities, according to the gifts of God. The Westminster Confession of Faith and the catechisms teach our duties toward superiors and inferiors. That sounds strange to our modern ears. But that is precisely because radical equality is, in many ways, a modern idea. This is not to say that it is right or wrong. But it is to say that it is not a necessary component of the Christian faith, even if we regard it as an attractive part of our own Christian faith. Manifestly faithful forms of Christianity have existed with no reference to, no thought of, and no accommodation for, radical egalitarianism. The point is, the concept of dignity which Garcia promotes is not inherent to the Christian faith. So then, we have to ask, why import such a concept into the church? By bringing in the predispositions of current, prevailing, political ideologies, it runs the risk of tearing down the faith and of forfeiting the ability and responsibility to critique the ideologies of the surrounding culture.

In his discussion of dignity as both gift and task, Garcia presents dignity as both the motivating cause of the struggle against oppression and as the goal and purpose of those struggles. I am sure this is historically correct for many situations. But what does it have to do with the church? That is, are we not motivated by the grace of God as our starting point and by the glory of God as our goal? Why would we want any other? Why would we want something less, even if it were good in and of itself? The church today, in its eagerness not to offend, often adopts as its greatest purpose some good deed against which no person of good will could possibly object. But then, what do you have? A church unwilling to proclaim the gospel, or at best unsure about how to proceed, instead busies itself with such projects as building houses for

the homeless. It is good to build houses for the homeless. But, as David Wright has warned us, we must beware the good becoming the enemy of the best.

Just as Garcia uses the concept of human dignity to prop up the language of human rights, so does he turn to the Christian faith to prop up what he has already decided human dignity to be. One might wish that he would start with scripture and move forward, but that is not what has happened here. Looking back in this way has resulted in some strange observations. For instance, Garcia writes: “Our intelligence, memory, imagination, freedom and the capacity to transform our social and natural world are signs of our being creative agents that share in God’s image and likeness.” This is important to his project, since he has already decided that human dignity involves our being creative agents. But it is not true to the creation story, which portrays clearly that God is the Creator and we are not. It is not true to the rest of scripture, which understands that God is God and we are not, and that God’s thoughts and ways are high above our thoughts and ways. It is not true to the Reformed heritage of the Christian faith, which has emphasized the majesty and sovereignty of God and has understood the radical distinction between God and humanity. This problem emerges again in the section on redemption when Garcia writes about humans containing a portion of the “substance of the divine.” To be made in God’s image is one thing. I know of no part of our heritage which would remotely suggest that we contain some part of God. To appeal to such as a basis for human dignity is to confuse and debase Christian belief.

The problem of Garcia’s turning to scripture and theology to support what he already believes comes up again in his discussion of the Trinity. The most he can get out of this is that we were “created to live in relationship with others and with nature.” Why would he not want to say the most important thing of all, that we were created to live in relationship with God?! Surely this would be our greatest dignity, and he ignores it altogether. Why? Because his program is political, not theological.

Under his treatment of the incarnation, Garcia writes of our “contributing to the coming of the promised Kingdom” and of “the product of our steadfast service.” Does he not understand that the kingdom is God’s gift, not our accomplishment? Apparently not. When he starts with the celebration of human achievement, this is where it leads.

Another way of expressing my concern about this project is to raise the question of reductionism. What the Christian faith and church have to say about human beings cannot be reduced to secular, political language about human rights and human dignity. There is more to it than that. There is a great struggle going on about how to understand what it means to be human. And if we capitulate, if we give up our own vocabulary to use that of our opponents, then we have cooperated in and become partly responsible for our own demise. Christianity would become no more than a prop for the current, prevailing, political ideology. Even if that ideology happened to be a very good one, in and of itself, becoming a mere prop for it would be a terrible loss for Christianity.

As Garcia continues, Christianity is further relegated to being a secondary prop. He writes, “The language of human rights has helped us *the most* in expressing what we value in humanity and, thus, in defining what human dignity is” (emphasis added). Here is explicit endorsement of the political origin and nature of this program. He does not regard the Christian faith as a primary source for our understanding of human nature, value, purpose, or dignity. Instead, he regards the secular language of human rights to be of the greatest value.

Perhaps a few more examples would be helpful. Garcia writes that travelling missionaries with slide shows about starving people are effective in raising money from churches because

such shows generate a sense of violation of basic human dignity. I certainly hope that this is not the case. I do not believe that it is the case. Instead, I think that people give to feed the hungry because they know that to do so is an act of love and of direct obedience to the commands of Jesus Christ. I think that people give to support the mission of the church because they believe that God wants them to do so. I think that people in the church give because the suffering witness of Christ on the cross compels them to do so. I simply cannot recall, nor can I imagine, any effective missionary appeal being based simply on some notion of maintaining human dignity. That makes no sense at all. Some secular, United Nations appeal might take that approach, but not a Christian missionary. And any effectiveness of such a United Nations appeal might depend less upon its explicit basis than upon vestiges of the influence of the Christian faith upon society and the people to whom the appeal is being made.

It is less than helpful that Garcia frequently introduces and even repeats terms that obviously have some value and meaning to him but for which he fails to provide any definition or rationale. In the midst of this discourse on human dignity and rights, we suddenly hear about “self esteem,” “autonomy,” “authenticity,” “identity,” “originality,” “communal self realization,” “plurality,” and so forth. What do these apparently valuable, presumably psychological or sociological, but undefined terms have to do with a Christian understanding of human dignity? What would importing them into Christian discourse do to that discourse? Why, two-thirds of the way through, does Garcia introduce and then drop the term “the dignity of God,” which may or may not be useful to the project of filling out our understanding of human dignity?

As a final example of the elevation of political interests over theological ones, consider Garcia’s odd truncation of Augustine’s thought precisely while appealing to his name for some authority: “In good Augustinian fashion, love of family and friends while good in themselves must lead to social and national love, and national love and loyalty must lead to international love and bonding.” Set aside the question of whether “international love and bonding” are even possible. The point is that Augustine encouraged us to look beyond life in this earthly realm and to seek our true life and citizenship in the City of God. To stop at any point along the way and to love inordinately any part of the created order, even the whole world, instead of using it as a sign to point us toward the one God whom alone we are to love and to enjoy, would be an abysmal failure, sin, and—if not corrected—death.

I would suggest to Professor Garcia that human nature and therefore any sense of human value and dignity might be articulated better through a classical Christian understanding that human beings are created and therefore finite and limited, are created in the image of God and therefore self-conscious and transcendent, are fallen and therefore self-interested and flawed, and are redeemed by Christ and therefore have good hope for the future. This would be an attempt to understand humans being through the language of the faith, not through secular language committed to the elimination of faith.

So, how does this concept of human dignity relate to the Christian church in general and to the ministry of the local congregation in particular? Not very well. Can it serve as a theological principle to guide or affect the everyday ministry of the pastor or the mutual ministries of the members of the church? Not without undermining those very ministries. How can or should it affect the way people relate to each other? How can or should it affect the mission of the local church to people outside or beyond the church? At first glance, such questions appear easy. Who could be against human dignity? It would seem obvious that the church would want both to acknowledge and to encourage human dignity, both to recognize and to teach it, to uphold it and to seek it. It would seem obvious that the church would want to treat

its members and its neighbors with respect and common human decency. Of course we want to treat each other with respect. Of course we want to love neighbor. Of course we want to seek and to work for greater justice in the world. Of course we would want to do all that, and much more. And therein lies the question.

As we look at this particular project on human dignity, as we look at this particular program and proposal and as we attempt to consider how and whether it might be of use or help in the local church, we must raise certain questions: On what grounds would this concept of dignity be introduced? On the secular grounds of human rights. For what purpose would it be promoted? For the political securing of those rights. To what end or effect would it tend? To the elimination of the language of the Christian faith. How would it relate to the gospel? By reductionism and replacement. Would it be helpful to the cause of Jesus Christ? Hardly. Professor Garcia's "On Human Dignity" is found to be lacking in theological usefulness to the Christian church.

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