

MIDWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

MADE: THE VALUE AND DIGNITY OF HUMANITY

A POSITION STATEMENT

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT

OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE COURSE

M-HT 3400 CHRISTIAN ETHICS

BY

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Debating Dignity

At the core of every political, sociological, and ethical debate is a discussion about the importance of dignity, on which all sides agree. Dignity is a concept that “unifies us as a species, transcending class and cultural divides,”¹ meaning it is not so much the *why* of dignity as it is the *how* that brings much divisiveness to the moral issues of today, namely abortion and euthanasia. “Pro-life” and “pro-choice” camps rigorously defend their own positions while also working to dismantle their opponents, each accusing the other of minimizing human dignity. In order for progress to be made, one must examine which position stays more true to its original quest of preserving dignity and go forward from there. This paper defends a pro-life ethic toward abortion and euthanasia as the clearest and most consistent expression of human dignity. This argument is supported in and through a right understanding of “life” and “choice” and the doctrine of the Incarnation.

Defining “Life” and “Choice”

An important distinction must be made between what makes us human biologically and scientifically, and what makes us human personally. The real ethical problem in both abortion and euthanasia is centered on the *personhood* of the human.² For the pro-choice mother considering abortion, her temptation to

¹ John F. Kilner, *Why People Matter: A Christian Engagement with Rival Views of Human Significance* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 10.

² John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 2 ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 81-82.

view her baby as a “clump of cells” is not so much an attack on biology as it is an attack on personhood. The same goes for the pro-choice son considering the euthanasia of his “vegetable” father; the concern remains with personhood, not biology. If opposing sides hold in agreement the importance of dignity, the next step is determining where personhood truly begins for abortion, or ends for euthanasia.

In a society clamoring to keep truth relative, a common response to such questions is to let everyone choose as they wish and let that be that. The “freedom to choose” is what those who support abortion appeal to. Importantly, the opposing ethic to pro-life is not called “anti-life,” but “pro-choice.” John and Paul Feinberg explain why this is so. “Pro-choicers often vehemently claim that they are not pro-abortion. They decry it as much as pro-lifers do. But they feel that a woman’s right to choose what to do with her body must be paramount.”³ Pitted against the paramount value of life is the paramount value of choice. How does one gain ground in what seems to be an unmovable tug of war?

Before exploring the doctrine of the Incarnation, two observations should be made. First, those who believe freedom of choice is of primary importance will be disappointed at the reality of freedom’s limitations. Bob Dylan eloquently expressed it this way:

Ah, my friends from the prison, they ask unto me

³ *ibid.*, 80.

"How good, how good does it feel to be free?"
And I answer them most mysteriously
"Are birds free from the chains of the skyway?"⁴

The quest for complete human autonomy is futile, because every semblance of freedom has boundaries or limitations. The fish is most free when it swims in the water, but it is *bound* to it as well; for a fish out of water is anything but free. The freedom of life itself is bound to something outside of one's desires, no matter one's worldview. The question then becomes, *bound to what?* Christian theology, and many with a pro-life ethic, would say man's freedoms are bound to the rule, creation, and order of God.

The second observation that needs to be made confirms the first. Christians can and should ground their ethic in Christian theology, even if another does not. As the Feinbergs rightly note, "The ultimate justification of an ethical stance is a defense of the worldview upon which it rests."⁵ With this in mind, the proposed ethical stance can be rightly justified by what the Scriptures teach.

Made Flesh

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14). This verse has received much attention throughout church history. It has been used to support the teaching of the preeminence, the humility, and the presence of Christ, among other doctrines. Could this verse also have anything to say concerning the ethics of life?

⁴ Bob Dylan, *Ballad in Plain D*. New York City: Columbia, 1964.

⁵ John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 747 n. 87.

According to Graham Cole, there are exegetical and theological reasons to believe so. Cole observes that the *logos* became *sarx*, a Greek word for “flesh” that in this instance means “in the totality of all that is essential to manhood.”⁶ This is profound for ethics purposes; for he became like us not simply in the sense of a representation, but biologically, anthropologically, *totally*, save sin. “The very fact that God became truly human underlines the value of human life.”⁷ In the same way the *imago Dei* was reserved for humanity only (Gn 1:26-27), so Christ came to us as a human only; how much Christ valued humanity compared to all else is profound (see Mt 10:31). Cole quotes theologian Jürgen Moltmann, who compellingly draws a line directly from the Incarnation event to a pro-life ethic:

If the Son of God became wholly and entirely human, and if he assumed full humanity...it comprehends humanity diachronically, in all its phases of development – that is, it includes the being of the child, the being of the foetus [sic] and the embryo.⁸

Recovering Dignity

It is in the Incarnation where Christ’s emptying Himself of His glory to become human (Phil 2:7) is recovering the dignity of humanity. He was made *sarx* in every way, because flesh *mattered* in every way. Interestingly, had Jesus Christ been born today, He might have been the subject of two separate ethical dilemmas

⁶ *Vine’s Concise Dictionary of the Bible* (1999), s.v. “flesh.”

⁷ Graham A. Cole, *The God Who Became Human: A Biblical Theology of Incarnation*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 30 (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 150.

⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 85. Quoted in Cole, *The God Who Became Human*, 150.

over these very issues of abortion and euthanasia. He was carried in the womb by a virgin who was not trying to get pregnant, and He was subjected to terrible, long-lasting suffering as He hung on the cross! David Scaer puts it poignantly: “We should defend the lives of all children, if for no other reason than the truth that God became a child not in Bethlehem but in the womb of his mother.”⁹

If humanity truly wants to preserve its own dignity with logical consistency, it must pursue a pro-life posture from the moment of conception to life’s final breath. Nuance and conversation is to be expected, because these are life-or-death and intricate issues, as intricate as creation itself (Ps 139:15). The sanctity of life is drawn from God’s creation or God’s prerogative, but arguing that the Incarnation demonstrates valuing human life at every stage of development only bolsters the burden of proof. All earthly life will one day pass away (Eccl 3:20), but so will death itself (Rv 20:14). Christ came that life may abound, valuing it enough to take it upon His own human shoulders. “He donned our humanity.”¹⁰ The Church must strive to protect life, whether it is from abortion or from euthanasia, because it is the pattern Jesus Christ set before her. For man is not his own; he was bought with a price (1 Cor 6:19-20).

⁹ David P. Scaer, *Abortion, Incarnation, and the Place of Children in the Church: All One Cloth*, Concordia Theological Quarterly 77 no. 3 (St. Louis: Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, 2013), 228.

¹⁰ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 127.

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Paper Evaluation

Name: _____ Topic: _____

I. The next items are rated according to this scale: 1 = inadequate and 10 = superior.

Introduction (Thesis statement/ clear issue)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Clear Outline	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Development of Thesis (Followed outline)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Quality of Research / Sources	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Clarity in Defining Issues	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Strength of Argument	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Accuracy of Data and Assertions	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Analysis / Critical Thinking	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Use of Scripture / Exegesis	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Logical Argumentation	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

II. The following need attention if so indicated:

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|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Logical Argumentation | <input type="checkbox"/> The paper is too long/ too short |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Appropriate Use of Scripture | <input type="checkbox"/> Edit your paper more thoroughly |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Biblical Exegesis | <input type="checkbox"/> The paper needs balance |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cite resources correctly | <input type="checkbox"/> Quality of Research / Sources |

III. Comments