

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS New Testament Foundations of Human Dignity and their Implications

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Abstract

Often closely associated with democracy, human dignity and respect for human dignity have become pivotal values and concerns of our age. This is the case because of the atrocities and crimes that were committed against humanity in all parts of the world during the 20th century and clear signs that these continue unabated in the present century. Throughout most parts of the past two or three centuries the emphasis on human dignity and the “discovery” and defence thereof have often been cherished as an achievement of humanism and the European Enlightenment. The article argues that the New Testament (and with it the Christian tradition) also makes an important contribution to the current understanding and discussion of human dignity. Human dignity is not a characteristic granted (or denied) by humans to other humans, nor it is based on race, nationality, gender, personal achievements, education, material means and so on. The New Testament bases human dignity on the fact that humans are created in God’s image, chosen by God, ransomed by the blood of Jesus, God’s Christ, endowed with God’s Holy Spirit, and called to serve God in their bodily existence and as heirs of eternal life in the presence of God. Therefore humans must act accordingly and must be treated accordingly by their fellow humans.

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Introduction

Democracy and human rights are closely linked.¹ When Christians think and speak about human rights, they often refer to humans being created in the image of God according to Genesis 1–2. Their origin from God guarantees a certain and inalienable dignity and as its implication certain human rights. This reference to creation is as obvious as it is right. One example suffices. Peruvian scholar Alphonso Wieland writes: “The biblical concept of human dignity is based on the creation of human beings in the image of God (Gen 1:27; see also 9:5–6). To God, all humans are valued the same ‘without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status’ (Article 2, *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*).”² In some instances of Christian theological discussion of human dignity, this is where the reference to the Bible stops. However, most authors refer to other and more biblical assertions. For example, Eugene TeSelle writes that, “The affirmation of human dignity is often justified by appeal to the creation of humans in the image of God, to God’s grace, and to the Incarnation,”³ although he does not explain in what way divine grace and the incarnation affirm human dignity.⁴ The analysis of Angolan scholar Luciano Chianeque regarding human rights and the churches in Africa also applies to many Asian contexts:

In Africa, deeply affected by past and ongoing colonialism, slavery, forced labour, and exploitation of all kinds, churches see human rights in terms of a theology of creation, and of redemption based on God’s will (the Ten Commandments, Ex 20:1–17), the creation of humans in God’s image, God’s everlasting love for humans reflected through their love for

¹On the relationship between human rights and democracy see D. Beetham, *Democracy and Human Rights*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, and A. Somek, “Menschenrechte und Demokratie,” in A. Pollmann, G. Lohmann, ed., *Menschenrechte: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2012, 363–369.

²“Human Rights,” in J. Corrie, ed., *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, Nottingham, Downers Grove: IVP, 2007, 173–175, at 174.

³“Human Rights 1) Introductory Entry,” in D. Patte, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 572–573, at 572.

⁴An example of reference to God’s grace is the declaration of the national assembly of the *United Church of Christ in the Philippines* in 1974 which called for justice and asserted that “every individual, however lowly, is a child of the Heavenly Father.” See N. Villalba, “Human Rights and the Churches in Asia: The Philippines,” in D. Patte, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 573–574, at 574.

one another (Jn 13:34–35), and the redemption of God’s people through Moses and Jesus (emphasised by liberation theology).⁵

Chianeque adds further perspectives from creation, redemption, God’s will and love.

In this essay we want to gather and explain the New Testament’s assertions mentioned by these and other scholars. We also move beyond these instances of biblical assertions to examine what other aspects of the New Testament proclamation of Jesus as Christ and Lord contribute to a Christian understanding of human dignity, its affirmation and defence.

What follows is an exercise in broadening our horizons and in appreciating to what extent human dignity is implicit in the message of the New Testament, in its anthropology and soteriology but also in other aspects of its theology. I present my own short version of what Christopher D. Marshall argued for the whole Bible in *Crowned with Glory and Honour: Human Rights in the Biblical Tradition* regarding human rights.⁶ Our summary can only be a broad survey and does not claim to be complete. It shows how the New Testament can and should be read with human dignity in view.⁷

With this focus on *human rights/human dignity* we follow one of four trajectories within the Christian tradition that have contributed significantly to the theory and praxis of democracy. This trajectory is outlined by South African scholar John W. de Gruchy as follows: “Heirs of the Radical Reformation, English Nonconformity, and liberal Protestantism who affirmed the dignity of the individual, human rights, freedom of conscience, separation of the church and state, and religious toleration.”⁸ The other three trajectories are

⁵“Human Rights and the Churches in Africa,” in D. Patte, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 573.

⁶Christopher D. Marshall argued for the whole Bible in *Crowned with Glory and Honour: Human Rights in the Biblical Tradition*, Studies in Peace and Scripture 6, Telford, PA: Pandora, 2001.

⁷For detailed treatment of each aspect, see for example the recent New Testament theologies of F.J. Matera, *New Testament Theology: Exploring Diversity and Unity*, Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007; T.R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ*, Nottingham: Apollos, 2008. Entries in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. J.B. Green, Downers Grove, Nottingham: IVP, 2013 (2nd edition); *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. G.F. Hawthorne, R.P. Martin, D.G. Reid, Downers Grove, Leicester, IVP, 1993; *Dictionary of the Later New Testament*, ed. R.P. Martin, P.H. Davids, Downers Grove, Leicester: IVP, 1997.

⁸“Democracy and Christianity,” in D. Patte, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 314–315, at 315; for a recent comprehensive discussions of human rights see A. Pollmann, G. Lohmann, ed., *Menschenrechte: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2012.

likewise worth pondering and are also based in different ways and to differing extent on the New Testament.⁹ Regarding all four trajectories, de Gruchy notes:

Each of these trajectories rejects tyrannical government in its own way. All acknowledge that human sinfulness leads to political corruption, even in democracy, although some are more optimistic about human nature than others; and all eschew selfish individualism and seek to develop forms of community as the place within which human beings find fulfilment.¹⁰

1. Broader New Testament Perspectives on Human Dignity

The New Testament affirms that human beings are created in the image of God and therefore have a special relationship with him. Based on this foundation, the New Testament also speaks of people being chosen by God, ransomed by the blood of Jesus, endowed with God's Holy Spirit, and called to serve God in their bodily existence and as heirs of eternal life in the presence of God. In view of these promises and prospects, humans must live accordingly and must be treated accordingly by their fellow humans.

1.1. Human Beings as God's Creatures

The New Testament presupposes throughout its pages the Old Testament tradition of God as the creator and sustainer of his creation. The living God made the heavens and the earth and the sea and all that is in them (Acts 14:15; see also 4:25). God is the one who "gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all the nations to inhabit the whole earth ..." (17:25). But there is more than mere creation in the beginning: while God allowed in the past generations all the nations to follow their own ways, he has not left himself without a witness in doing good, giving humans rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling them with food and

⁹De Gruchy, "Democracy ..." describes them as follows: 1. Notions such as subsidiarity and the common good, which emerged when medieval Roman Catholicism brought Christianity into Creative interaction with Aristotelian political philosophy. 2. The Calvinist tradition, which emphasized the need for mutual responsibility before God within a covenantal relationship of the people of a society. 4. The Christian Socialist tradition, which stressed human solidarity, egalitarian participation in the democratic process, and economic justice as the basis for the sustainability of democracy. See also the entries in the Church and state cluster in D. Patte, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 236–246.

¹⁰"Democracy ...," 315. For the contributions of Indian Christian theologies to discussions of democracy and Christianity see the survey by Felix Wilfred, "Indian Christian Theologies," in D. Patte, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*.

their hearts with joy (14:16–17).¹¹ God has revealed himself in this generous, holistic provision for humanity, indicating his appreciation for the work of his hands. As his creature, humans are called to turn away from their worthless idols and to worship the living God (14:15). Humans are not to worship, voluntarily or by force, other humans (14:14–17). They were created, “so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said: For we too are his offspring” (17:27–28). God is longing to be found and worshipped by his creatures. The calling and ability to search for God is integral to humanity. As God’s creatures, humans derive their inalienable dignity from God. They belong to him and are to fulfil his purposes in this world. At the same time they are responsible to him. Failure vis-à-vis God and their fellow human beings will bring divine judgement on them: God is the one who will call all to account on the last day in judgement and in reward: “God has fixed a day on which he will have judged the world in righteousness [in contrast to human judgement] by his appointed agent (Acts 17:31). All the nations will be judged by God according to their actions (Mt 25:31–46). God will establish his righteousness in the end, over against all human evil. The deeds of each individual, be they good or bad, count before God (see also Rom 2:6–16). As their creator, God shows no partiality and knows the human heart (Acts 1:24; 15:8).

His creatures matter immensely to God. Therefore, they never must “belong” to another human or be dominated by them. Biblical salvation history is the history of God’s regaining his full reign over all of his creation.

1.2. The Incarnation and Ministry of Jesus

The New Testament begins with four accounts of how God became man: the Son of God becomes human (Jn 1:1–18: “And the word became flesh and lived among us”). In theology often relatively little is made of the incarnation accounted in the infancy narratives of Matthew’s and Luke’s Gospel. At times, it is referred to in order to explain why Jesus could reveal the Father in a way that surpassed all other beings or previous mediators (Heb 1) or to refer to his full humanity (e.g. in Gal 4:4–5, “born of a woman”). Occasionally, Christians refer to it as the reason that Jesus himself was without sin and therefore able to bear the sin of the world on its behalf (2 Cor

¹¹See C. Stenschke, *Luke’s Portrait of Gentiles Prior to Their Coming to Faith*, WUNT II.108, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999, 178–193, 203–224.

5:21, Christ “who knew no sin”; no reference there to the virgin birth). Yet there is more to this core teaching. According to Marshall, through this act God revealed himself in a personal way to humanity, and thus in a manner which is more adequate for a personal God than the revelation through the display of his glory as Creator in the created world (Ps 19:1) or even through personal communication in the words of prophets, law-givers and the authors of wisdom traditions.¹² At the same time the incarnation also enabled God to be united with humanity in Christ and so to bear their sins, die and make atonement for them in one act of sacrifice and reconciliation (2 Cor 5:19–21). What humans could not do themselves was thus done in a human being by the Son of God. Simultaneously God demonstrated his saving love by bearing the consequences of sin himself (Rm 5:8). In addition, through the incarnation Jesus became the author and head of a new humanity in which those who believe in him are united with him, share in his divine sonship, become co-heirs with him of glory, and participate in his divine nature (Rom 8:17, 29–30; 2 Petr 1:4). Marshall concludes that the doctrine of the incarnation is essential for the Christian doctrine of salvation and renewal.¹³

In the theology of the Orthodox tradition, a great emphasis has been placed on the incarnation and its implications for all of humanity. The fact that the infinite and eternal God appears in the form of human flesh dignifies all human existence.

Athanasius argues that Jesus’ divinity must be identified with that of the true God; otherwise, there is no hope for salvation. In what is now a classic phrase, Athanasius declares that “God became a human being (*anthropos*) so that a human being can become god.” This logic of divine-human communion functioned as a first principle throughout the history of Orthodox theology, both patristic and contemporary. This understanding of the Incarnation in terms of the divine-human union in the person of Jesus Christ is the foundation of the well-known Orthodox notion of *theosis* (divinization).¹⁴

The importance of the incarnation is continued in salvation (see below). Believers are a new creation and under the promise of eternal bodily existence in the presence of God. People with the promise or prospect of participating even in divine nature have a tremendous dignity, which must be respected.

¹²I.H. Marshall, “Incarnation,” in T.D. Alexander, B.S. Rosner, ed., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Leicester: IVP, 2000, 576–581, at 577.

¹³“Incarnation,” 577.

¹⁴A. Papanikolaou, “Incarnation in the Orthodox Tradition,” in D. Patte, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*.

These implications of Jesus' incarnation are continued in the particular circumstances of his ministry. While Jesus found harsh words for his opponents and all who misuse religion to their own ends (e.g. Mt 23), the ministry of Jesus gives ample evidence for Jesus' respect and concern for the dignity of his fellow human beings. He not only met with the well-to-do and religious elite, but went out of his way on many occasions to meet "the sinners" and people who were marginalised in different ways. A prime example is Luke 19:1-10: "The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." He had pity on a group of lepers and restored them to health and community (Lk 17:11-19). He healed and commissioned the Gerasene demoniac, perhaps the most dehumanised being in the Gospels (naked and already "living" in tombs as if dead, Lk 8:26-39). Jesus raised the only son of a widow from the dead, restoring his life and her future (Lk 7:11-17). He restored people's health so that they could take care of their own needs.

Jesus broke some of the religious (and other) conventions of his day by socialising with women, accepting their veneration, calling a number of them into his following (Lk 8:1-3) and by breaking the rules of pure and impure on several occasions. He did not reprimand a hemorrhagic (and thus) unclean woman for touching his garment (Lk 8:43-48). He put people above the letter of the Law as some of his contemporaries understood it.

Jesus' actions are reflected in his teaching. He shows concern for the "little ones" and blesses children (Mt 18:1-7; 19:13-15). According to him, there is rejoicing in heaven when one sinner repents (Lk 15). Jesus taught and miraculously fed large crowds as he had compassion for destitute and hungry people: "and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mk 6:34; 6:30-44, 8:1-9). He demanded just treatment of the poor and called for generosity toward the needy. He also encouraged the forgiveness of debts. Christopher Hays summarises:

Jesus allotted a prominent place in his ministry to marginalised individuals: the handicapped, the perpetually unclean, children and also the poor. This eschatological proclamation included a resumption of the prophetic notion that people should practice justice and mercy in order to prepare for God's redemption of Israel (Isa 56:1; 58:6-10; Amos 5:14-15; Mal 3:1-12), a belief that Jesus shared with John the Baptist (Mt 3:1-6; Mk 1:3-5; Lk 3:1-14).

In accordance with the prophetic summons to justice, Jesus spoke out against exploitation (Mt 23:23/Lk 11:42; Mk 12:40/Lk 20:47) and acted on his convictions as well. Jesus' so-called cleansing of the temple, an event

typically considered to be one of the precipitating factors of his crucifixion, probably was an expression of outrage against the injustice of the high priestly establishment... Jesus characterised the temple as a “den of robbers” because of the corruption of the leading priests, who were known at times to use price manipulation and even thuggery ... to increase their already considerable fortunes.¹⁵

This dedication to all human existence, no matter what its current state, clearly indicates Jesus’ deep appreciation of the dignity of human beings as God’s creatures to be restored and redeemed.

Jesus is the first *new* human being (Rom 5:13–21). All of what it means to be human in God’s sight becomes clear on the face of Christ crucified, risen from the dead and exalted. Jesus is the author and head of a new humanity. Those who believe in him are united with him and participate in his divine sonship. They become children of God, co-heirs with Christ of glory and even participate in the divine nature (Rom 8:17, 29–30; 2 Pet 1:4). While the glory of God was to be seen on Moses’ face during the Old Covenant, it is now visible on the face of Jesus (2 Cor 3). Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is the model and guarantee of the bodily resurrection of all humans. A greater appreciation of physical human existence is hardly possible.

1.3. Salvation: Inclusion into the People of God

The New Testament paints a drastic and dark portrait of people prior to faith as under divine wrath, dominated by sinful flesh and under the reign of sin in Romans 1:18–32 and Romans 6:1–7:25. They are in need of salvation. However, it needs to be noted that this portrait is supplemented by the more nuanced portrayal in Romans 2. There Paul writes that some non-Jews know and do the will of God. Humans are not merely the Augustinian *massa damnata* (from which a few might be predestined and saved); their deeds are deemed significant and are judged individually. What they do or not do before God and to one another does matter to God. God takes humans very serious.

A strong indication of the appreciation of human dignity in the New Testament lies in its soteriology. For such people, the “weak,” sinners and enemies (Rom 5:6–10), God sent his Son out of love to die on their behalf: “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). The world, including humanity is the object of divine love (Jn 3:16). Some passages in the New Testament indicate that God’s salvific purposes are not limited

¹⁵“Rich and Poor,” in Green, *Dictionary*, 800–810, at 803.

to humanity but extend to all of his creation.¹⁶ Humans are ransomed by the blood of Jesus (Acts 20:28), they benefit from the life of Jesus given as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45) and they are granted by God the repentance that leads to life (Acts 11:18). God reconciled people to himself through the death of his Son (Rom 5:10). Salvation is not limited to the “worthy” by whatever definition, but, “not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise ...” (1 Cor 1:26–29).

Soteriology concerns not only the past and present, but also the future: Christians do not only stand in grace now but can be assured of their hope in sharing in the glory of God (Rom 5:2). Being justified by the blood of Christ now, they will be saved from the wrath of God in the final judgement. Reconciled to God, their eventual salvation is sure (5:10). Christians are promised bodily resurrection from the dead, glorification and eternal life in the presence of God: “And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power” (1 Cor 6:14, see also 1 Cor 15).

Beings for whom God has done all this, to the extent of giving his Son for them, in contrast to what they would actually have deserved, have a tremendous dignity and must act and be respected and treated accordingly, some modern theology is universalist in its scope. There are a number of biblical references that support this understanding, for example Colossians 1:20: “through Christ God was pleased to reconcile *all things* to himself.”¹⁷ However, there are also numerous passages that indicate an eventual “double issue” and limit salvation to those divinely elected (divine activity) or to those who respond to the Gospel in faith (human activity).¹⁸ This is not the place to enter an extensive debate but to briefly reflect its implications for human dignity. As it is a matter of *divine* election, humans must never assume too much for themselves and may never deny to others the implications of salvation for human dignity. Divine sovereignty does not limit human responsibility. The choices which people make are real and significant (there is a measure of free will); people are

¹⁶For a survey see W. Longchar, “Land, Theological Perspectives and Praxis of Indigenous Peoples in India, Other Asian Countries, and North America,” in D. Patte, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, 707–708, at 708.

¹⁷See G. O’Collins, *Salvation for All: God’s Other Peoples*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

¹⁸For brief surveys, see T.R. Schreiner, “Election,” in T.D. Alexander, B.S. Rosner, ed., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Leicester: IVP, 2000, 450–454, and S.N. Williams, *The Election of Grace: A Riddle without a Resolution?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015.

held responsible for their actions. God does not immediately interfere, discipline and judge, but grants people life and time and only calls them to account at the end (Mt 13:30, 48).

1.4. Further Benefits of Salvation

However, Christian salvation involves far more than these present and future benefits. Not only priests, kings and prophets as of old, but all believers receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:3–6). God's Spirit dwells in them (Rom 8:9). The Spirit which has been given to them assures them of God's love that has been poured out into their hearts through the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5). Their bodies have become temples for the Spirit: "your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and you are not your own" (1 Cor 6:19). The Spirit works His fruit in them (Gal 5:22–23). Through the Spirit they are enabled not to walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. Living in this way, they set their minds on the things of the Spirit (Rom 8:4–6), thus experiencing life and peace. Not just ordained clergy or special office bearers, but each and every Christian receives the gifts of the Spirit to edify others and to serve the world. "God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us" (Acts 15:9). They are no longer dominated by the flesh and the power of sin, but are called and enabled to live by the Spirit (Rom 6–8). God's Spirit dwells in people, transforms them and gives them perspectives well beyond this world. In a mysterious way, God's Spirit is also at work in unbelievers (Jn 16:7–11).

Believers become part of the church, of a new community, which is the body of Christ. Full affirmation of the individuality of people and of their calling to community goes together. In the way in which believers love each other, the world will recognise that they belong to Jesus (Jn 13:34–35).

The people thus saved and gifted are "holy" and called to the process of sanctification. Real change is possible: Christ is to be formed in them (Gal 4:19). Their past is indeed over: "And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:11). Their bodies have become "members of Christ" (v. 14). They were bought with a price and are now to glorify God in their bodily existence (v. 19).

Believers also become partakers in God's vision for this world. They are called to become active agents in the purposes of God.

While multitudes of angels would be at the Lord's disposal, the good news is to be lived out and proclaimed by people. Spreading and giving expression to the kingdom of God is entrusted to them. They wait for the consummation of the kingdom of God at Christ's *parousia*.

The pneumatology, doctrine of sanctification/ethics and eschatology of the New Testament (and other aspects) fully affirm human dignity, to act and to be treated accordingly.

1.5. Democracy?

The New Testament does not directly speak of democracy as a form of government of states. The events it recounts and interprets are firmly set within the autocratic political structures of the Roman Empire in Judea, Syria, Asia Minor and Greece. These were far from democratic in any understanding of the word.

Some structures of the new community which Jesus and the apostles founded were hierarchic. Jesus and the disciples did not vote on whether they should go to Jerusalem and whether he should die there, be buried and resurrected. He simply told them that this was to happen according to God's plan, went on his way and they followed—however little they understood of what he announced. Later Paul also went to Jerusalem, and even though his fellow travellers (including his long-time co-worker Timothy and representatives of several churches and regions, Acts 20:4) urged him not to do so (Acts 21:12). The new community was led by the apostles, other prominent figures such as James, and had its office bearers (elders and deacons). This—admittedly predominant—hierarchical picture has determined and shaped much of the reception history of the New Testament in this regard.

Yet there are also traces of other forms of organisational structure and governance, which have not only been emphasised in biblical studies and by some ecclesial movements (Presbyterian, free churches such as the Brethren Movement or churches in the Baptist/Mennonite tradition; in the Roman Catholic Church in monastic traditions) but also in recent discussions of synodality within the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁹ In this context, Roman Catholic

¹⁹See the document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018) by the *International Theological Commission*; http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html. See my reflections in C. Stenschke, "'Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church ...' (Acts 15:22): Synodality in the Early Christian Community of Jerusalem according to the Acts of the Apostles," *Asian Horizons: Dharmaram Journal of Theology* 14, 1 (2020) 7–29.

scholars (and many other keen readers of the Bible!) have pointed to instances in the New Testament when the whole community was involved in decision-taking and had a say in matters. Perhaps these elements in the Christian heritage are re-discovered in the discussion of synodality in the Church and will be allowed to shape its future.

Some examples have to suffice: While the apostles presented the suggestion and provided the criteria, the whole early Christian community in Jerusalem was involved in selecting people who would oversee their social ministry to poor widows (Acts 6:1–6). When they heard of the need of impoverished Christians in Jerusalem, the disciples in Antioch “determined everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea” (Acts 11:29), although Paul and Barnabas were present and entrusted with the delivery of the funds (11:30). In his letters, Paul addresses entire communities (not just the leaders) and presents his case to them. All of them are to understand, be involved and pray for his ministry. Paul ensures that all Corinthian Christians would be involved in his collection enterprise for Jerusalem. It was not to be an exercise in enhancing the status of wealthy community members according to the patterns of Hellenistic-Roman benefaction (1 Cor 16:2; “each of you is to put something aside ...”).²⁰ Paul calls Christ-followers to serve each other (and the world around them) with the spiritual gifts which they received. Each of them is a valuable and necessary member of the body of Christ (Rom 12:3–8). This is an expression of genuine love (12:9). People were involved and could contribute to decisions in their community and to its ministry.

While the New Testament writers have Christian communities in view, these traces can—with proper hermeneutical reflection—also be applied to issues of democracy. At the very least they indicate that the type of democracy we are concerned with today, is not an exclusive child or import of Western traditions (a case which few informed people would argue today!²¹) but rooted in ancient Jewish-

²⁰ See B. Blumenfeld, *The Political Paul: Justice, Democracy and Kingship in a Hellenistic Framework*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series, London: T & T Clark Continuum, 2003, and A.C. Miller, *Corinthian Democracy: Democratic Discourse in 1 Corinthians*, Princeton Theological Monographs 220, Eugene: Pickwick, 2015.

²¹For a survey of the debate about the global validity of human rights, see A. Pollmann, “Der menschenrechtliche Universalismus und seine relativistischen Gegner,” in A. Pollmann, G. Lohmann, ed., *Menschenrechte: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2012, 331–338, and G. Paul, “Der Diskurs über ‘asiatische’ Werte,” A. Pollmann, G. Lohmann, ed., *Menschenrechte: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, 348–352.

Christian traditions (which themselves shaped Western tradition significantly). Obviously, there are also roots and traces of communal leadership and other elements in other traditions.

2. Implications

We have seen that human dignity does not just appear in the margins or on the first pages of the Bible. Focussing on the New Testament, we have seen that it is foundational, explicit and implicit to the grand story of salvation in the New Testament.

Created in the image of God, humans have a dignity that no one can take away from them. It is a dignity that is not dependent on sex, age, race, economic status or otherwise. Thus, it does not need to be gained and cannot be lost.

While painting a devastating portrait of human beings under the reign of sin and death, the New Testament also fully affirms humans and their dignity. They are the object of divine love, redemption and eschatological completion. Therefore, concern for human dignity, and inseparably linked to it, human rights, is a truly biblical concern.

The Gospel surely is the “good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mk 1:1). With all the centrality that the Protestant tradition has rightly placed in Christology, one must not overlook that the gospel is also the good news for the sons and daughters of humans. Not only are they the addressees of the Gospel (together with the non-human part of creation, Rom 8:19–22), but the gospel also affirms their dignity in many ways.

This affirmation of human dignity has clear implications for the essence and ministry of the church and for Christian ethics. Despite the fact that Christians are called to be brothers and sisters in Christ, the church has a mixed record of affirming and respecting human dignity within its own realm and sphere of influence. While there are many inspiring examples of how and when Christians were respected, affirmed and developed way beyond their background and possibilities, there is also a long record of disregard for human dignity. There was and still is misuse of power in the house of God, where the dignity of those entrusted to church leaders was not respected. Various forms of abuse occurred. Other areas also come to mind: in many Christian contexts, single people, people who had to face the trauma of a family break-up or people beyond the standard Christian sexual orientation were not treated with dignity.²² Often in

²²See A. Goddard, D. Horrocks, ed., *Pastoral Resources for Church Leaders: Biblical and Pastoral Responses to Homosexuality*, Evangelical Alliance, UK, 2012.

church discipline, people living “in sin” were treated in a way that would not induce them to repent but rather to turn their back on the church for good. In the New Testament it was the Pharisees who did not respect basic human needs and placed the letter of the Law over and above people.

Until recently the Church also had its own record of dealing with those it deemed to be heretics. In my own Baptist tradition and experience we have been on the receiving end of such disrespect for the human right of religious freedom. It is not surprising that one of the first and generally recognised champions of human rights was Richard Overton, a Baptist!²³

For many centuries, the sharp polemics and at times actions in many inter-church relationships did not reflect an appreciation of the human dignity of those who disagreed with them. So in some sense, churches need to make sure they deal with their own heritage before freely lecturing others regarding human dignity and human rights.

In its history the church also has a mixed record of respecting, advocating and defending the human dignity of those outside the church and of openly disregarding the dignity of humans. To the church belong champions of human rights such as Bartholomé de las Casas (1484–1566), who established and defended the dignity and rights of the native Indian population in South America against the Spanish and Portuguese Christian conquerors.²⁴ The role of the South African churches in opposing and overcoming apartheid that denied some human rights to the majority of the population—most of whom Christian in some form—has been well researched.²⁵ Yet in the encounter of the Western church with other parts of the world and its inhabitants there were also the sad incidents, when “Some missionaries had a very low regard for the natives and almost seemed to doubt their humanity.”²⁶

In many cases, the church and individual Christians were silent when they should have spoken out against gross disregard of human

²³For a summary, see G. Stassen, “Human Rights,” in W.A. Dyrness, V.-M. Kärkkäinen, ed., *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Worldwide Church*, Nottingham, Downers Grove: IVP, 2008, 405–414, at 406.

²⁴See P.C. Lim, “Las Casas, Bartolomé de,” in D. Patte, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 712 and L.A. Clayton, *Bartolomé de las Casas: A Biography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

²⁵For a brief survey, see M. Motlhabi, “South Africa,” in D. Patte, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 1172–1175, at 1174–1175.

²⁶See Motlhabi, “South Africa,” 1174 on early mission enterprises in South Africa.

dignity and human rights. My own German Baptist Convention in Germany (and most other Christian denominations) was silent during the years of Nazi rule and World War II. During these periods Jews, Sinti and Roma, Russians, homosexuals and others were regarded and treated as *Untermenschen*, as sub-humans. In contrast, the cherished Germanic-Aryan race proclaimed itself to be the *Herrenmenschen*, the master race destined to dominate the world. Many of those who committed atrocious crimes against humanity in the twentieth century were nominal members of Christian churches.

One of the current challenges for global Christians is the ever-widening streams of migrants for all kinds of reasons. Are these people only seen and treated as potential or real threats to our privileges and relative affluence or as humans who serve to be treated with respect?

Chianeque writes at the end of his survey of human rights and churches in Africa:

As they become aware of these violations of human rights, churches are working together across denominations and with secular nongovernmental organisations. Yet Africa and African churches have a long way to go in the struggle for human rights and in dealing with the long-term consequences of their violation.²⁷

Much of this assessment also applies to churches elsewhere. The broader New Testament vision of human dignity has the potential to inspire and encourage churches everywhere on this long way ...

²⁷"Human Rights," 573.