

The Value and Respect of Human Life

There are certain theological positions taken within the Reformed tradition which include such issues as abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, and participation in war which rests on the same basic premise. It is essential that this premise be fully understood.

God has an infinite value and unequivocal love for human life. After the fall of mankind as indicated in Genesis 3, the remainder of the biblical story is the story of God's loving pursuit to reestablish at-one-ment. That atonement is finally and fully established in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

God's unequivocal love is manifested in the ministry of Christ where we see revealed the ultimate ground for the valuing of human life. The persons most rejected by human society, most despised by men, are the very ones to whom Jesus reached out with tender love and concern. Above all, His sacrifice on the cross affirms God's love and concern for us as human beings as being of great value, precious in His sight.

In many respects, God's love and concern are made explicit in the Sixth Commandment, "You shall not murder." (*Exodus 20:13 NIV*) This commandment is expanded and enlarged by supporting scriptural references. As God deeply values human life, so he commands us to reflect that value in our relationships with one another.

Historically in the Reformed theological tradition, the extent of God's command has been expressed in both the Shorter and the Larger Catechism.

In the Shorter Catechism, we have the following statements:

Q. 68 What is required in the Sixth commandment?

A. The Sixth commandment requireth all lawful endeavors to preserve our own life and the life of others.

Q. 69 What is forbidden in the Sixth Commandment?

A. The Sixth commandment forbiddeth the taking away of our life, or the life of our neighbor unjustly, or whatsoever tendeth thereunto.

In the Larger Catechism, we find these obligations considerably expanded, for there we read as follows:

Q. 135 What are the duties required in the Sixth Commandment?

A. The duties required in the Sixth Commandment are: all careful studies and lawful endeavors, to preserve the life of ourselves and others, by resisting all thoughts and purposes, subduing all passions and avoiding all occasions, temptations and practices which tend to the unjust taking away the life of any, by just defense thereof against violence; patient bearing of the hand of God, quietness of mind, cheerfulness of spirit, a sober use of meat, drink, physic, sleep, labor and recreation; by charitable thoughts, love, compassion, meekness, gentleness, kindness; peaceable, mild, courteous speeches and behavior, forbearance, readiness to be reconciled, patient bearing and forgiving of injuries, and requiting good for evil, comforting and succoring the distressed, and protecting and defending the innocent.

Q.136 What are the sins forbidden in the Sixth Commandment?

A. The sins forbidden in the Sixth Commandment are: all taking away from the life of ourselves or of others, except in the case of public justice lawful war, or necessary defense; the neglecting or withdrawing the lawful or necessary means of preservation of life, sinful anger, hatred, envy, desire of revenge, all excessive passions; distracting cares; immoderate use of mean, drink, labor and recreation; provoking words oppression quarreling, striking, wounding and whatsoever else tends to the destruction of the life of any.

From these obligations we may discern three basic prohibitions. First, we are, in a passive sense, to do no willful harm. Second, in a positive sense, we are to promote the well-being of others and therefore, to protect from harm. Third, we are not unjustifiably or unlawfully to take a life.

It is immediately apparent that these three responsibilities may come in conflict with one another. For example, the duty to do no harm to someone who might be attacking another person with malicious intent may come in conflict with the duty to protect from harm the one being attacked. Within the Reformed tradition, historically there has been weight towards the obligation to protect from harm when that duty is in conflict with the obligation to do no harm. This has been based on the judgment that protecting from harm is ordinarily more in keeping with respect for life.

It is on that judgment, for example, that when an attacker is threatening the life of another who is innocent or does not seek to do harm, we are not permitted the luxury of non-action or of pacifism, for that is not consistent with respect for life that is in keeping with God's ordering.

Again, there may be some irreducible conflict between the duty to do no harm and the duty to protect from harm in case of defending oneself, or in the case of war. Thus, where both duties cannot be followed, and where God's command requires action, the duty to protect from harm seems to be favored and is most in keeping with respect and reverence for life.

Above all, the overriding obligation and the paramount duty is to seek to determine and then fulfill that which is most consistent with respect for human life. Since such a decision may, in fact, result in the taking of a life in a manner considered justifiable, such an action would not be a violation of the Sixth Commandment. Indeed, such an action may be more consistent with the obligation to respect life.

In considering our obligation to show respect for human life even as God shows infinite and unequivocal love for human life, we must at the same time recognize that human life has certain limitations. In seeking to show respect for human life, it must be done in the context of those limitations. These include such things as the reality of death and the limitation of life because of death, the limitation we have in our ability to endure pain and suffering, the limitation of our knowledge and our ability to know, and the limitation we have to bear emotional pressure and stress.

These are considerations that we must understand when we consider important decisions of life and death. For example, in consideration of our death limitation, doing no harm may mean permitting a terminally ill person to die. Or again the depth of pain may be such that protecting from harm might mean refusing to intervene in the prolongation of life. However, it is to be clear that our human limitations never permit us to be in violation of a clear command of God.

We see, then, that our duty to do no harm and to protect from harm may be modified by those limitations that are part of our humanness. Thus, in considering specific issues, these duties and these limitations will play an important part in the decision making process. This position paper on the value of and respect for human life will serve as background material for consideration of important issues previously mentioned and which include among others, such matters as abortion, suicide, euthanasia, war and capital punishment.

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