

Adventists and Human Dignity

I. Why do Adventists believe in human dignity?

On November 17, 1998, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists published a *Statement on the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. It asserts: “*In promoting religious freedom, family life, health, mutual assistance, and meeting crying human need, Seventh-day Adventists affirm the dignity of the human person created in the image of God.*”¹

Why do we believe in human dignity? From the first page to the last, the Bible teaches us that every human being is precious to God: (A) God created humans; (B) Christ died for humanity; (C) He wants to dwell in us through the Holy Spirit; (D) God gave us His commandments so we can live healthy, happy lives. God could not have shown more clearly how important we are to Him.

A. God Created Humans

The roots of human dignity are found in the first chapters of the Book of Genesis. God created Adam and Eve and gave them the breath of life. Human beings were

the crowning act of creation: “Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have domination over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created man in His own image; . . . male and female He created them.

Then God blessed them and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth’ (Genesis 1:26-28, NKJV).²

The place of human beings in creation is absolutely unique. All other living creatures are merely referred to as “living things,” but God created humans in His own image. As persons, Adam and Eve received a mission: to be God’s managers on Planet Earth. The difference between

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By John Graz



Slave auction, Richmond, Virginia

the biblical concept and ancient pagan traditions or the theory of evolution is dramatic. Human beings are not the product of natural processes or the arbitrary actions of a lunatic divinity. We are the fruit of God's love and part of His global design. We are called to be the main actors in an extraordinary destiny. When we also deal with other human beings, we deal with God, their Creator. We cannot escape that basic truth: We have been created by God in His image, in His resemblance, for a special purpose. This is the foundation of human dignity. This concept should be incorporated in Adventist schools at all levels.

B. Christ Died for Humanity

After Adam and Eve sinned, God did not abandon them. The promise of salvation came right after the Fall: The devil, represented by the serpent, would be crushed. Human dignity would be restored. Because of God's love for humanity, "He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." When Jesus came to Earth as the Son of God, He identified with the poorest among the poor

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and commended us to do the same. "Assuredly I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me." Human beings, despite their sinfulness, have intrinsic worth. Every time one of them is abused, tortured, or humiliated, Christ is distressed. The creatures made in the image of God, for whom Christ died, should never be treated like ordinary objects to be used and discarded, but like irreplaceable jewels.

C. We Are the Temple of the Holy Spirit

Because they were created by God and redeemed by Christ, human beings are the temple of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul writes: "Do you know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone defiles God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple

is holy, and you are that temple" (1 Corinthians 3:16, 17, NRSV). In the same letter to the Christians of Corinth, Paul states: "Or do you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price . . ." (6:19, 20).

We are therefore responsible for the way we treat ourselves. We cannot say "my body belongs to me; I can do whatever I want with it." Our bodies belong to our Creator, so we must respect and manage them the best we can. Treating our own bodies poorly not only negatively affects our health and personality, but also the global image we develop about human dignity.

D. God Gave Us His Commandments

The Ten Commandments constitute the first charter of human rights. Violating their principles has a direct effect on one's quality of life, peace, and dignity. Positive human relations can be built only when murdering, lying, and stealing are not sanctioned.

The first four commandments underline our allegiance to God, the



Women's suffrage parade, Washington, D.C., 1913

Source of our rights. Jesus summarized this part of the law in a few words: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with your soul, and with all your mind . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37). God is the supreme reference for the respect we should give to others.

In giving us the Decalogue, God provided us with a mandate to promote and protect human dignity. Each person has great value. The people of God are to build relations with others based on a recognition of the intrinsic value of each person. For

example, God commands us not to disrespect others by killing them, stealing from them, or coveting their possessions.

II. Human Dignity in the Bible

Through the Bible, God teaches us to be sensitive about the protection and defense of human dignity. When God's people betrayed these principles, He taught them through their mistakes to value every human being. Through Nathan, God taught David that even a mercenary had rights, and the king had to respect them (2 Samuel 12:3). Jacob had to learn that

lying and stealing are not the way to succeed. No one has the right to exploit or to oppress others.

Jesus, of course, is our ultimate Model. He spent hours with prostitutes and publicans who were despised by society, giving them hope. He listened to the sick and those possessed by devils, and healed them in spite of the prejudices of His time (Matthew 9:36; 15:22-28). He talked with women and played with children, who had few if any rights in ancient society (Matthew 18:6). He valued each person as a creature of God, vested with dignity. He said of the children: “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6, NRSV).

When Jesus saw the needs of the multitude, “He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick” (Matthew 14:14). He could have used His popularity to manipulate people and benefit Himself. But He did not. He was moved with compassion for their plight. He saw them as creatures of God. These who have nothing, who are rejected, have value to Jesus because of their importance to God.

In ancient times, the poor were seen as having lost their human dignity. Because they were dependent on the generosity of others, they were treated with contempt. But God said: “Blessed is he who considers the poor; The Lord will deliver him in time of trouble. The Lord will preserve him and keep him alive, and he will be blessed on the earth” (Psalm 41:1, 2).

The people of God were not put on Earth just to decry all the transgressions and oppressions. They should seek to correct these problems and to further human dignity in every way they can. Whenever human dig-

nity is attacked, the devil is victorious. James wrote to the Christians: “if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors” (2:9). “Partiality” means discrimination, which oppresses the dignity of human beings created in God’s image.

III. Human Dignity as a Test of Our Actions

Humans have always been tempted to isolate religion from their daily lives. But when God orders us to love Him with all our being and our neighbor as ourselves, He brings us back to reality. Our religion has to be put into practice every day. Our relationships with other human beings form the core of our lives. The prophet Isaiah denounced a religion that is only a matter of ritual and tradition: “In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, and exploit all your laborers . . . Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you invite to your house the poor who are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh?” (Isaiah 58:3, 6, 7).

Religion must be more than rituals. It is not just inspiring prayers, lovely music, and uplifting sermons in a beautiful church. James gives us a wonderful definition of true religion. It is not a catalogue of doctrines, even if the doctrines are right. It is life! “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27). It is the protection of human dignity.

A. The Adventist Commitment

From the time their church was founded, Seventh-day Adventists have stood for human dignity. Early on, they took positions against slavery

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and all forms of social injustice. Ellen White wrote:

“Slavery, the caste system, unjust racial prejudices, the oppression of the poor, the neglect of the unfortunate, these all are set forth as unchristian and a serious menace to the well-being of the human race, and as evils which the church of Christ is appointed by her Lord to overthrow.”³

On the subject of human dignity, Ellen White wrote: “The Lord Jesus demands our acknowledgment of the rights of every man. Men’s social rights, and their rights as Christians, are to be taken into consideration. All are to be treated with refinement and delicacy, as the sons and daughters of God.”⁴

Based on the teachings of the Bible and Ellen White, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has developed a ministry of restoration and respect for human dignity. We have thousands of schools, hospitals, community services, and other institutions and associations. The Adventist Development and Relief Agency is working in approximately 150 coun-

Picture Removed

tries throughout the world. We have taken a leading role in promoting religious freedom for all. In these ways, our church has positively affected the quality of life for millions of people.

But what about the defense and promotion of human rights and human dignity? What about legislative discrimination? What about policies dealing with war and terror? What about systems and political structures that negatively affect people's lives, creating famine, refugees, and concentration camps? What about the AIDS pandemic? What about child slavery? Abuse of women?⁵

B. The Silent Church

In 1998, Zdravko Plantak published a courageous and eloquent book about our church and human rights entitled: *The Silent Church*. In it he wrote: "Adventists must become involved [in the world] because their God cares and wants them to care for each other. Identifying with Jesus means identifying with the poor, oppressed and those whose basic rights and freedoms are denied them. It is not enough to care for a person and have no concern about the laws that affect the life of that person in society."⁶ When faced with the very sensitive problem of slavery, Ellen White was very clear. While calling for an improvement in the condition of the slaves, she forcefully condemned this evil system. She wrote: "The institution of slavery . . . permits man to exercise over his fellow man a power which God has never granted him, and which belongs alone to God."⁷ She went further, condemning the keeping of slaves as "an insult to Jehovah."⁸

The Adventist pioneers understood that in order to uphold and restore human dignity, the church cannot be isolated from the community. According to James White, the Christian "has really as much interest in

this old world as any man. Here he must stay and act his part until the Prince of Peace shall come and reign."⁹ This vision, that the Christian role in helping people must go beyond the traditional welfare approach, was reflected in an 1865 General Conference resolution: "Resolved that in our judgment, the act of voting when exercised in behalf of justice, humanity, and right, is in itself blameless, and may be at some times highly proper; but that the casting of

such crimes as intemperance, insurrection, and slavery, we regard as highly criminal in the sight of Heaven."¹⁰ This means that the promotion and defense of human dignity involves "*the act of voting*" to change laws. However, a limit has been set: "But we would deprecate any participation in the spirit of party strife."¹¹ What Ellen White wrote about the promotion of temperance in November 1881 may be extended to any activity that positively affects the



In Fisheni Village, Zambia, ADRA's literacy program furthers fundamental human rights and dignity by educating the 79 percent of childbearing women who are illiterate.

restoration of human dignity: “Every ‘temperance’ advocate is duty-bound to counteract [the moral paralysis upon society] by precept and example—by voice and pen and vote.”¹² This means that church members should act to reform the societies in which they live.

Human Dignity: A Core Value

We must teach our students that human dignity is a core value of Adventism. We should never support policies or attitudes that deny it. As a church, we should be prudent and wise when speaking officially. Being a Silent Church on such a vital issue for millions of people is like being ashamed of Jesus our Saviour and God our Creator. Christians should not be part of any enterprise that transforms a creature of God into a thing or an object. It is not only a question of consistency, but one of testimony. We should never forget that on Earth, we are the ambassadors of the Kingdom of God. We are witnesses of a new world that God will establish where human dignity will be totally restored and established forever.

Such a commitment will have a great effect on our individual and collective testimony and on the scope of our students’ potential contributions to society. God has promised: “Then your light shall break forth like the morning, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you; The glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard” (Isaiah 58:8). ✍



John Graz, Ph.D., is Director of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, Department of State Liaison, and United Nations Liaison for the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist headquarters, Silver Spring, Maryland. A citizen of both France and Switzerland, Dr. Graz is also Secretary General of the In-

ternational Religious Liberty Association.

Classroom Application Ideas

“Adventists must become involved [in the world] because their God cares and wants them to care for each other.”

—Zdravko Plantak

1. Look up the definition of human dignity in various dictionaries and discuss the differences between the definitions.
2. In newspapers and magazines, look for examples of respect and non-respect of human dignity. Work together in small groups, then report from each group on what you find.
3. Investigate an area where Adventists have been traditionally involved in promoting and defending human dignity. Report your findings to the class.
4. List some areas where Adventists have been part of a “Silent Church” and cite reasons why you think this has occurred.
5. Discuss Jesus’ defense of the poor, women, children, etc. Cite texts and references to support your points.
6. Did Jesus take risks in defending human dignity? If so, how?
7. Divide into small groups. Each group is to write the names of three people in the Bible who made a difference when defending human dignity. Share your findings with the class.
8. Organize a local chapter of the International Religious Liberty Association.
9. Organize “The Day of Human Dignity,” with exhibitions and guest speakers;
10. Send letters to the legislators and the president/prime minister of your country, encouraging them to promote and defend human dignity.
11. Visit Web sites that promote and defend human dignity. For example: <http://www.IRLA.org> and <http://www.uscirf.gov>. Report on your findings.

Read:

Bible texts about: justice, poor,

rich: For example, Genesis 1: 26, 27; John 3:16; Matthew 18:6; Isaiah 58:3c, 6, 7.

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Ask yourself:

How do the Bible teachings about human dignity influence my life?

How can Jesus’ example influence my involvement in my school and community?

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9. James White, “Non-Combatants,” pp. 76, 77; *ibid.*, p. 34.
10. “Report of the Third Annual Session of the General Conference,” p. 197; *ibid.*, pp. 36, 37.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Ellen G. White, “Temperance and the License Law,” *Review and Herald* 58 (November 8, 1881), pp. 289, 290; *ibid.*, p. 38.