



Dr. Cornelis Van Dam is professor of Old Testament at the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton, Ontario cvandam@canrc.org

What is Human Dignity?

Human dignity has its origin in God

A central concept in current discussions on the legalization of euthanasia is human dignity. However, our definition of human dignity will determine not only how we deal with the problem of “mercy” killing, but with a host of other issues as well, such as abortion. So, what is human dignity and how should it be defined?

We are in the happy situation that Mark Penninga, director of the Association for Reformed Political Action (ARPA), has popularized his Master’s thesis on this topic and published it with the title, *Building on Sand: Human Dignity in Canadian Law and Society* (2009). In this editorial I wish to pass on some of the results of his work and thereby hopefully encourage you to buy and read this important book. References to this book are indicated by page numbers in parentheses.

Human dignity as defined in Canada

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the topic of human dignity within our Canadian context. After all, the Supreme Court of Canada has said over and over again that the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* is inextricably bound to concepts of human dignity (9). Although the term dignity is not even mentioned in the Charter, the concept has become a central principle in Canadian case law. So, how does the Supreme Court perceive human dignity and use it in their decisions?

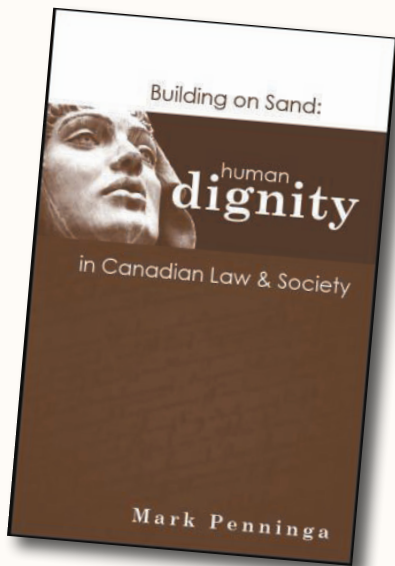
In an important 1999 clarification of human dignity (in *Law v. Canada*), the Supreme Court of Canada defined the concept as follows.

Human dignity means that an individual or group feels self-respect and self-worth. It is concerned with physical and psychological integrity and empowerment. Human dignity is harmed by

unfair treatment premised upon personal traits or circumstances which do not relate to individual needs, capacities, or merits. It is enhanced by laws which are sensitive to the needs, capacities, and merits of different individuals, taking into account the context underlying their differences. Human dignity is harmed when individuals and groups are marginalized, ignored, or devalued, and is enhanced when laws recognize the full place of all individuals and groups within Canadian society. Human dignity within the meaning of the equality guarantee does not relate to the status or position of an individual in society per se, but rather concerns the manner in which a person legitimately feels when confronted with a particular law (20).

Penninga shows that when all has been said and done it is clear that the concept of human dignity has been reduced to an affirmation of individual autonomy and human equality. In effect, the freedom of the individual to do what he or she wishes and the right of an individual to feel good have become central. Since human beings and their desires are fickle and ever changing, they are a very subjective foundation on which to rest human dignity and judicial decisions. As a result contradictions and controversy on matters relating to human dignity plague Canadian constitutional law (29).

Some reflection on the secular humanist approach shows that only those people who are able to assert their autonomy benefit from such a subjective understanding of human dignity. If human dignity is not intrinsic to our humanity but is a function of



our choice-making, then only those who are able to make choices can be considered to have dignity and be worth protecting (24). This means that the unborn, the disabled, and the elderly are the first to be discriminated against as the legalization of abortion and the growing support for euthanasia indicate. In other words, in the view of the Supreme Court, human dignity is not really inherent in being human, but it is for autonomous agents who basically define what they want human dignity to mean (24).

All of this illustrates the utter subjectivity of modern legal thinking about human dignity. To base jurisprudence on such a foundation is indeed building on sand, as the title of Penninga's book underlines. What is needed is an explanation of human dignity that is objective and above all normative. For that Penninga turns to God's Word.

Human dignity according to Scripture

Historically western culture has been influenced by the Bible for its understanding of human dignity. According to Scripture, human dignity is based not on man, but on God, the Creator. He gave humans dignity by creating male and female after his own image (Gen 1:27). This means that human dignity has its origin in God. He has set the human race apart from the rest of his creation to be the crown of his handiwork with the mandate to love God and to care for and rule over this world on God's behalf.

This God-given identity has all sorts of real life repercussions. To be human is to be above and separate from the animal world. As our culture turns

its back to God and embraces evolutionary worldviews the distinction between the life of humans and animals is blurring. People often get more upset about killing seals or culling rabbits than killing the unborn.

Since being human means being made in the image of God, human dignity is inherent in our very creation. It's not about something that has been added to our being; rather, it is at the core of what it means to be human. Although we have been made after God's image, the distinction between God and man, the Creator and creation, must nevertheless be maintained. Being an image of God speaks of the calling God has given us to exercise dominion over the earth for God (57f.). Man has responsibilities and is answerable to God.

Contradictions and controversy on matters relating to human dignity plague Canadian constitutional law

There is also a darker side to being human. It means being a participant in the fall of our first parents, Adam and Eve. They fell because they believed Satan's claim that they could be autonomous and only answerable to themselves. Since the fall, the image of God in the human race has been marred, although not absent (cf. Gen 9:6).

This truth has several implications. Because being human means that one is made after God's image, God still holds man accountable for the original task which God has called him to, namely to rule the earth for God and represent the Creator's interests (also cf. Rom 1:18-21). Also, because to be human is to be made after God's image, human life is precious in God's sight and the violation of human life calls for just punishment (Gen 9:6). Furthermore, since all humans have been made in God's image, they should all be treated as being of equal worth and dignity. There should be complete equality among humans from a legal and political perspective, regardless whether one is a Christian or an unbeliever (67).

However, to do full justice to human dignity as grounded in being in God's image one needs to recognize that man has been made with a divine

purpose. God did not create man after his image for man's sake, but for the sake of his glory so that his creation would serve Him. And therefore a Christian understanding of the dignity of man as rooted in God's creation work in paradise and renewed in the second Adam, Jesus Christ, is the only sound way of speaking of human dignity.

The main consequence

There are many consequences of a biblical view of human dignity, but perhaps the most basic and overarching one is the need for society and the courts to see people not as free autonomous agents who determine what their rights are, but as those who have responsibilities to God and their fellow citizens in accord with God's designs for his creation work. The dignity with which God endowed humans by virtue of making them in his image entails enormous responsibilities to God and the neighbour. These responsibilities include the need to protect life as God gave it, whether it be the life of one newly conceived, or mentally or physically disabled, or on the life of one terminally ill. Penninga helpfully goes through several important Canadian court cases involving abortion, euthanasia, and equality rights and evaluates the judicial rulings in the light of God's Word (83-91).

In chapter 5, Penninga shows that the Christian view of human dignity is both legitimate and necessary for Canada. Christian principles are good for the nation! They foster true freedom and human worth. This is not to suggest that Christianity must be forced on the population, rather it is to recognize that applying biblical principles to public life, culture, and the courts will yield great blessings for these principles are consistent with God's design for his creation.

In conclusion, visit the website <http://arpa.canada.ca/> and get a copy of Penninga's book, *Building on Sand*. And while you're at it, if you have not yet done so, why not become a supporter of ARPA or at least sign up for their free newsletter? This organization is working hard "to educate, equip, and encourage Reformed Christians to political action and to shine the light of God's Word to Canada's municipal, provincial, and federal governments."

