The New Testament and the Sanctity of Life

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After much delay, I return to the long-promised summary essays drawn from my slowly developing work on the sanctity of life (forthcoming from Eerdmans). Prior essays offered an overview of what I mean by the sanctity of life and what the Old Testament contributes to an understanding of life’s sanctity. In this essay, I face the joyful but demanding task of distilling a number of profound New Testament themes that contribute profoundly to a broad, holistic understanding of the worth of human life in God’s sight.

I want to suggest that the New Testament affirms the immeasurable value of human life in four primary ways: (1) its depiction of Jesus’ kingdom ministry, (2) the theological implications of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, (3) the impact of Jesus Christ on the human condition, especially in the lives of those who are his followers, and (4) its depiction of the expansive reach and inclusive ethos of early Christian communities.

(1) Jesus’ kingdom ministry

Jesus carried forward crucial life-affirming aspects of the Jewish tradition, both in his teaching and in his actions. He articulated a creation theology affirming God’s care for human beings while employing his power over creation to manifest that care. He taught and exemplified the compassionate deliverance for suffering people that God had exhibited to Israel. He offered a rendering of Jewish legal and ethical norms that heightened and broadened the protections offered there to human life. And he both articulated and embodied the prophetic vision of an eschatological shalom in God’s inbreaking future—the reign of God. Jesus also manifested and advanced the sanctity of life in his fundamental commitment to peacemaking over against violence, in his radically inclusive ministry, and in his teaching about the depth and breadth of God’s love for humanity.
God became human in Jesus Christ. Even quite apart from what this God-man did, the very fact of God's stooping low to take human form and to share our condition in every way other than sin has impressed generations of Christians. When God stooped low, humanity was raised high. No one who believes in the Incarnation can believe that human life lacks immeasurable worth. God's sanctity has touched humanity in person; in the Person Jesus. Jesus himself extended the range of the idea in his crucial teaching about how God evaluates our lives (Matthew 25:31-46). Here Jesus teaches us to see himself in the face of every person, especially every suffering and vulnerable person. One might say that Jesus suggests that God came to dwell not just in one man, but in all people: ?as you did it unto the least of these, you did it unto me.? This passage also teaches us to notice human bodiliness: our thirst, hunger, illness, and loneliness. God came in a body that suffered, and demonstrates his care for all bodies that suffer, and judges us in part based on whether we do the same.

Jesus Christ died on the Cross for the redemption of the world?including each and every human being. This we proclaim at the heart of Christian faith. It is really all we need to say when seeking to demonstrate that ?God so loved the world.? The God-man was abused, humiliated, tortured, and judicially executed?for me, for you, for all. God?s amazing love is demonstrated, but so, in a strange way, is a radically egalitarian kind of human neediness. I have contended that one aspect of a full-orbed understanding of life?s sacredness is universality, and with that, equality?and before the Cross, all stand equal. Christ died for all. All are invited to respond to God?s sacrificial and delivering Yes with a grateful and humble Yes of their own. Each and every human life matters immeasurably to God.

Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Through him, God defeated death. He is the firstborn from the dead. Life triumphs through the gracious power of God. All who are found in Christ are hidden in him and will join him in eternal life. Indeed, because Jesus is the God-man who now ?sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,? humanity has already pierced the veil of divinity and, as Karl Barth said, has been ?permitted to triumph over sin, death, and the devil.? God stooped low to save us; we responded by murdering his Son; God responded by raising him from the dead and inviting us to follow along. Such love! Such mercy!

(3) The Impact of Jesus on the Human Condition

The New Testament teaches that the coming of Christ has had a decisive impact on the human condition. One way to summarize it is that through Christ, God has begun the resanctifying of our created yet desperately fallen world. The Church is that community in which the resanctifying of humanity has begun.

I notice two very interesting ways that the Apostle Paul comes at this issue. One is his creative reworking of the Genesis imago Dei theme into an imago Christi theological anthropology (cf. 1 Cor. 15:42-49, Col. 1:15-20, 2 Cor. 3:18, 4:4). Paul argues that Jesus Christ is the image of God. Every human being since Adam has exhibited a damaged, deficient embodiment of the divine image. But Jesus demonstrates God's original intent for human life, and those found in Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit are gifted with at least the possibility of this remaking and repairing of their humanity so that it progressively comes to conform to the image of God as exhibited by Jesus Christ. A world in which for every human being the damaged imago Dei has been remade into the glorious imago Christi would indeed be the kingdom of God.

The concept of sanctification is another way this issue is approached. The etymological similarity to sanctity is not accidental. We were made for sanctity, we have fallen from sanctity; we are restored to sanctity in Jesus
Christ. Sanctification is the divinely initiated process by which human beings are gradually sanctified?conformed to the image of Christ, morally and spiritually remade. We need to hold two dimensions of sanctity in creative tension here: human beings are simply sacred in God?s sight by God?s decision; but God also has great interest in human beings actually becoming what we were originally intended to be?creatures of a purity, nobility, holiness, and love that resembles the character of God our Creator. And because it is God?s intent that all should be remade in this way, every human being must be viewed and treated as the much loved, much sought object of God?s redemptive and transformative love.

(4) The Expansive Reach of Early Christian Community

Finally, the New Testament offers various descriptions and glimpses into the growth of communities of Christian faith of astonishingly expansive love. From an initial core group of discouraged Jewish followers huddling in the ashes of the Crucifixion, the Church grew exponentially across racial, ethnic, national, and linguistic lines. Empowered and sent by the Holy Spirit, Christians scattered across the known world and formed communities that at least some of the time approximated the Galatians 3:28 vision: ?there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.?

This was not just a sociological fact; it became a theological anthropology. Paul especially excelled at describing the impact of the Christ-event in creating ?one new humanity? (Eph. 2:15) out of peoples previously locked in hostility. The crossing of the previously impenetrable Jew-Gentile barrier led but did not exhaust the boundary-crossing, hostility-dissolving experiences available in this new Christian community. Here enemies became brothers and sisters. Here justice and love prevailed. Here God was reclaiming the world. Here God was remaking humanity. And one aspect of that reclaiming and remaking was the birth of radically inclusive and hospitable communities demonstrating the capacity to overcome ancient human enmities.

Let me close with my working definition of the sanctity of life:

The sanctity of life is the conviction that all human beings, at any and every stage of life, in any and every state of consciousness or self-awareness, of any and every race, color, ethnicity, level of intelligence, religion, language, nationality, gender, character, behavior, physical ability/disability, potential, class, social status, etc., of any and every particular quality of relationship to the viewing subject, are to be perceived as sacred, as persons of equal and immeasurable worth and of inviolable dignity. Therefore they must be treated with the reverence and respect commensurate with this elevated moral status, beginning with a commitment to the preservation, protection, and flourishing of their lives.

The New Testament offers overwhelmingly important resources for such a conviction. ?For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but should have everlasting life.?

Next essay: Church History and the Sanctity of Life.

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