

Valuing the vulnerable



David Potter MBE, the founder of Prospects, a Christian charity which supports people with learning disabilities, explores the biblical basis for valuing every human life.

When I first encountered humanism, I was fascinated. I assumed that their self-styled title implied a particular interest in people. It was years before I got round to reading what they had to say about their views and when I did I was amazed to discover that they have far more to say about religion than about humanity. It quickly became clear that when it comes to biblical Christianity, humanism just doesn't get it.

As humanist writers see it, the difference between their position and ours is one of theology: belief or disbelief in the existence of God. They see all religion and their devotees as hamstrung by their duty to obey the demands of deity out of fear of reprisal. And it has to be admitted that, for much of organised religion, they have a point. For those with a biblical mindset, however, the motivation is not fear but love, love for God first and then love for other people.

What humanists overlook is another difference which is at least as great as our divergence over the existence of God: we have a very different anthropology. King David posed the question, 'What is man?' (Psalm 8:4). The answer given will determine how we value one another as people. Humanists and Christians offer profoundly different answers which, in





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turn, increasingly result in different responses to the moral questions of the day.

In his book, *What is Good?*, AC Grayling, an English philosopher, puts the case for humanist morality. 'To a secular view, the notion of the intrinsic worth of others and of nature is the only true source of morality.' He then launches into an attack on a morality based on the selfish goal of rewards in some afterlife, but he ignores the need to establish any basis for his principle of 'the intrinsic worth of others'. Without that there is no basis for 'the only true source of morality'. It is a sleight of hand worthy of a magician rather than a philosopher.

Some humanists proceed on the basis that 'worth' is a figment of the imagination. Professor Peter Singer of Princeton University (and the author of *Should the Baby Live? The problem of handicapped infants*) argues that before a baby is recognised as a human being it should show evidence of faculties which are widespread in the human race. Those he calls 'mental defectives' may be used for scientific experimentation.

Closer to home, in March 2012, the website of the *British Medical Journal* published an article by Alberto Giubilini and Francesca Minerva advocating what they called 'after-birth abortion'. It is the ultimate devaluing of personhood. It is also the inevitable logic of evolutionism.

Evolution is value neutral: human beings are the result of time and chance. We are accidents of history. The notion of intrinsic worth evaporates and with it any reasoned basis for morality. Locating or describing humanist morality is rather like trying to nail down water!

In marked contrast to the vague assertions of humanism, biblical Christianity propounds a view of human beings which immediately recognises their value and by so doing renders both valid and wise the moral framework taught in scripture. The basis for valuing people is to be found at the very point where our original creation is described.

What we find in Genesis chapter one provides the clearest and firmest basis for understanding what we are as human beings. 'Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness..." So God created man in his own image, in the

image of God he created him; male and female he created them.' It is, of course, a breathtaking assertion, but it is one that is repeated after the fall (in Genesis 9:6) and it is the remaking of that damaged image which the New Testament anticipates will follow conversion.

Centuries of theological discussion have focused on how the divine image is evident in human beings. Some identify it in our capacity for relationships, others in characteristics such as creativity and rationality. It could equally well be both. Genesis describes our creation by God-in-relationship – 'Let us make', Father, Son and Holy Spirit – so that we can be in relationship, with God, with one another, and with the world in which he sets us.

At the same time, we reflect many of God's characteristics in varying degrees from one person to another. Whatever its precise meaning, the image of God in human beings is what gives us intrinsic worth. The incarnation and the cross demonstrate God's personal commitment to our value as people.

The issue of worth comes into sharp focus when considering the place of people with learning disabilities in society – and in the church. Where a person's worth is assessed in terms of fame, wealth, celebrity, power and productivity, people with learning disabilities are inevitably devalued, as is evident in attitudes to and legislation affecting abortion.

Immersed as we are in this society, it is no wonder that Christians too struggle to reflect biblical attitudes and values towards people with learning disabilities. If we look again through the lens of scripture, we begin to see a different picture.

A woman carrying a baby found to have Down's syndrome is recommended to have an abortion. Even late diagnosis may legally result in an abortion up to full term, well after that permitted for a child without a disability. If this is how they may be 'welcomed' into the world, it is not surprising to learn that a survey in 2011 found that over 50 per cent of people with learning disabilities in Britain (of whom there are 1.5million) reported suffering abuse from members of the public.

Such statistics may be an embarrassment in a society which regards itself as humane, but they are consistent with secularism's failure to provide any basis for valuing people who are disadvantaged or vulnerable.

Immersed as we are in this society, it is no wonder that Christians too struggle to reflect biblical attitudes and values towards people with learning disabilities. If we look again through the lens of scripture, we begin to see a different picture. Jesus rebuked the disciples for their failure to understand the preciousness of simplicity in the response of children to his love. This is exactly the same sort of simplicity that is found in people with learning disabilities.

Paul urges us to recognise as indispensable those in the body of Christ we view as weak or unimportant. 'Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,' he says in 1 Corinthians 12. The testimony of many congregations which have reached out in love and ministry to people with learning disabilities is that the church has been blessed far beyond its expectation.

The Bible's recognition of the value of every person provides us with a comprehensive and inclusive approach to everyone, without regard to their background, present situation or condition. Unqualified acceptance of a person's worth is integral to our faith and therefore must determine every aspect of our response to them.

Yes, it is different, and it is demanding, but if we take Jesus as our example then, like him, we will be committed to give expression to this dynamic truth at every opportunity. And like him, we will find ourselves drawn to those for whom the need to be valued is the greatest.