

## “Duty vs. Right”

One unique teaching of Christianity is the God-given dignity of each person. The early Christians lived in a brutal and violent world, and yet their witness and good works bore the fruit of a culture of life by affirming the authority of the Bible in all life. They lived “Christianly”, caring for the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the stranger, following the commands of the Old Testament and summarized by Christ as “love for neighbor”. This was their duty.

Our present day prioritizes “rights”. The late Canadian philosopher George Grant once argued that the basis of English-speaking justice is purely contractual: “rights are prior to any account of the good”. By this he meant that individual rights usurp questions about moral responsibility to each other. In his example of the American Supreme Court decision *Roe vs. Wade*, Grant lamented the right of one individual by negating the existence for a fetus. He calls this the “cup of poison”. “If foetuses [sic] are not persons, why should not the state decide that a week-old, a two-year old, a seventy-or eighty-year-old is not a person ‘in the whole sense’? On what basis do we draw the line?” Are there any limits? If so, who determines them?

I thought about this difference between duty and rights in the recent movement toward assisted suicide. Some countries, such as Canada, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, have legalized it, as well as some U.S. states. The same issue is currently debated in England, Wales, and Scotland. How do Christians make sense of this, especially in light of these countries having a rich history of Christianity?

Grant’s answer is that western civilization shifted its moral foundations since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Whereas western civilization was founded upon the Bible and classical philosophy, the modern view, repeated in the works of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant, share a common account that we take fate into our own hands. There is no transcendent law to which we must

conform. We make our own history. In such a case, dignity is no longer God-given but an expression of individuality. A person's right to express his or her individuality is prior to any sense of duty or responsibility to another person.

Churches must be places where people hear the teaching that dignity is God-given and restored through faith in Christ. Christians must bear witness of this message to the most vulnerable among us. Practical care must be given those considered the least valued by the present age. By doing so, we affirm a culture of life.

Additionally, churches and Christians must explain to people that there is something higher than individual rights. There is a duty to God and our neighbor. We must ask again about justice, what we are fitted for, and then repent of our rebellion. Only then can the gospel of Jesus Christ make sense, offering forgiveness and strength to truly love our neighbor.

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