

## **Human Dignity and Depravity: A Holistic Biblical Understanding**

Viktor Frankl endured three years in the Auschwitz concentration camp. After his rescue, he became professor of Psychiatry and Neurology in the University of Vienna. He also authored a heart wrenching book titled, "Man's Search for Meaning." In it he recounts experiences and lessons from his nightmare experience under the Nazis. Among many observations, he noted that inmates at the concentration camp are most likely to survive if they "knew that there was a task waiting for them to fulfill."

Frankl suggested that "the striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man." Writing in the late 1950's, he suggested that "The mass neurosis of the present time is the existential vacuum" (i.e. a loss of meaning in life.)

What Frankl observed almost five decades ago became a pervasive philosophy of despair known as nihilism. The word "nihilism" was first widely popularized by German Philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. German Theologian, Helmut Thielicke wrote that "Nihilism literally has only one truth to declare, namely, that ultimately Nothingness prevails and the world is meaningless" (*Nihilism: Its Origin and Nature, with a Christian Answer*, 1969).

"From the nihilist's perspective, one can conclude that life is completely amoral, a conclusion, Thielicke believes, that motivates such monstrosities as the Nazi reign of terror. Gloomy predictions of nihilism's impact are also charted in Eugene Rose's *Nihilism: The Root of the Revolution of the Modern Age* (1994). If nihilism proves victorious—and it's well on its way, he argues—our world will become 'a cold, inhuman world' where 'nothingness, incoherence, and absurdity' will triumph." (IEP).

More recently, apologist Ravi Zacharius noted that, "One by one the generation that refused to be bound by the Pope, and refused to be bound by the Church, decided in an ecstasy of freedom that they would not be bound by anything—not by the Bible, not by conscience, not by God himself. From believing too much that never did have to be believed, they took to believing so little that for countless thousands human existence and the world itself no longer seemed to make any sense. Poets began talking about the 'wasteland' with 'ghostly lives' as Stephen Spender put it, 'moving from fragmentary ruins which have lost their significance.' Nothingness became a subject of conversation, nihilism a motive, frustration and despair a theme for novelists and dramatists...yet all is not lost."

In 1992, John R. W. Stott also wrote about the pervasive sweep of nihilism, "Millions of people do not know who they are, nor that they have any significance or worth. Hence the urgent challenge to us to tell them who they are, to enlighten them about their identity, that is, to teach without compromise the full biblical doctrine of our human being—its depravity, yes, but also its dignity." (*The Contemporary Christian*).

The basis for Stott's urgent challenge is that, "Christians believe in the intrinsic worth of human beings, because of our doctrines of creation and redemption. God made man male and female in his own image and gave them a responsible stewardship of the earth and its creatures. He has endowed us with rational, moral, social, creative and spiritual faculties which make us like him and unlike the animals. Human beings are Godlike beings. As a result of the fall our Godlikeness has indeed been distorted, but it has not been destroyed. Further, 'God so loved the world' that he gave his only Son for our redemption. The cross is the chief public evidence of the value which God places on us."

I picked up a copy of Stott's book in 1993. When I read his balanced treatment of human dignity and depravity it helped me tremendously (He also outlined it in the early chapters of *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today*). In my background and training, emphasis was placed on human depravity and anti-self image talk. Although thankful for much of my training, this was clearly an area lacking biblical balance. It narrowly focused on certain theological emphases without placing them in a larger biblical framework. No doubt this emphasis was forged in reaction to erroneous thinking in the other directions. Contemporary thinkers outside of and within the Church began to promote views of humanity that downplayed depravity and almost deified humans. The self-esteem movement also ignored large and important portions of biblical truth. This prompted reactions in the opposite direction. God used the teaching of Stott to help me learn the way of God more clearly.

Stott believes that "Christian teaching on the dignity and worth of human beings is of utmost importance today... for the welfare of society." Stott observed that, "When human beings are devalued, everything in society turns sour. Women are humiliated and children despised. The sick are regarded as a nuisance and the elderly as a burden. Ethnic minorities as discriminated against. The poor are oppressed and denied social justice. Capitalism displays its ugliest face. Labor is exploited in the mines and factories. Criminals are brutalized in the prisons."

"But when human beings are valued as persons because of their intrinsic worth, everything changes. Men, women and Children are all honored. The sick are cared for, and the elderly enabled to live and die with dignity. Dissidents are listened to, prisoners rehabilitated, minorities protected, and the oppressed set free. Workers are given fair wages, decent working conditions, and a measure of participation in both the management and the profit of the enterprise. And the gospel is taken to the ends of the earth. Why? Because people matter. Because every man, woman and child has worth and significance as a human being made in God's image and likeness."

The balance in Stott's emphasis between the reality of human dignity and human depravity is often missing in ministry emphasis in the Church. We too easily become one dimensional. We focus on the spiritual needs and overlook the physical and social. Or, we reverse this pattern by deemphasizing the spiritual needs. Clearly the priority must be placed on the gospel and the human need to be reconciled to God. But we should not do this at the expense of a biblically holistic view of humanity.

In Auschwitz, Victor Frankl painfully discovered that darkest side of human depravity. He also observed the deepest reserve of human dignity. Sadly, we live in a world where we will continue to face both sides of our humanity. But we must not reduce or minimize the sweep of the gospel. It is God's power to address the whole reality of human being and human need.