

The Right to Life as a Divine Right

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John W. Kleinig

Life is still relatively good for people who now live East of Eden. God does not abandon the descendants of Adam and Eve because they reject Him. They do not die right away as might be expected. He does not write them off, even though He does punish wickedness in order to protect the world and its inhabitants. He does not give up on them but is still unobtrusively involved with them. He keeps them alive and protects their right to life even if they, like Cain, are murderers (Gen 4:13-15). He works with His left hand through what He has made to take good care of them. So, for example, He uses sexual intercourse to create children and parents to provide for them. He works through His ordinances in the order of creation to create new life and nourish it. Through His law he curbs sin and maintains civic righteousness. He upholds all things by the power of His word (Heb 1:3). That includes the right to life!

In his discussion on the marriage of priests in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession Melancthon claims that our natural, human rights are established by God's ordinances in creation (Apol 23.7-12). His ordinances are the decrees which institute and maintain right order in the world. Thus natural rights are built into the natural order of the created world. Since that is so, human regulations, such as those that establish so-called same sex marriage, cannot abolish any natural right, such as the union of a man and woman in marriage. Only God can override or change our natural rights. He concludes (Apol 23.12): "Natural right is really divine right, because it is an ordinance divinely stamped on nature."

By the decrees, recorded in Genesis 1 and elsewhere, God still orders the world for human life and continues to maintain human life. By His powerful utterances in Gen 1:3, 6 and 9 He creates the cosmic and terrestrial order that is needed for life to flourish on earth. By His decree in Gen 1:11 the earth produces vegetation. By His word of blessing to Adam and Eve in 1:20a, which is repeated for Noah and his sons in 9:1, 7 and for Jacob in 35:9-11, He enables them and their descendants to procreate. By His mandate for Adam and Eve in 1:20b He commissions them to rule over the earth as coworkers with Him. By His mandate in 1:29 he

provides food for them from the plants and trees just as, later in 9:3-4, He gives them the meat of the animals to eat.

These creative decrees which were once spoken at the beginning are still in force; they remain said. They are performative utterances that do what they say. So if God should no longer say, "Let there be light," the whole cosmos would become dark and chaotic, formless and void, unfit for life and growth. Through them God maintains the conditions for life on earth and keeps us alive. They create and uphold the right order for human life and for the reception of God's earthly blessings. So since they sustain God's good order in creation, the order for the transmission of His blessings, they, traditionally, are called divine ordinances. In the Apology to the Augsburg Confession XXIII.8 Melancthon rightly notes: "The Word of God formed human nature in such a way that it may be fruitful not only at the beginning of creation but as long as this physical [bodily] nature of ours exists. Likewise, the earth became fruitful by this Word [Gen 1:11]: 'Let the earth put forth vegetation; plants yielding seed.' Because of this ordinance, the earth commenced to produce plants not only in the beginning, but yearly the fields are clothed as long as this natural order exists."

The same pattern continues both before and after the fall. By His declaration in 2:18 the Lord God establishes and maintains the conjugal union of husband and wife in marriage. In response to Noah's burnt offering after the flood in 8:21-22 the Lord decrees that even though the human heart is still evil from youth to old age, he will maintain the good order for human life on earth with the agricultural cycle of seedtime and harvest, the meteorological cycle of hot and cold weather, the seasonal cycle of summer and winter, and the work cycle of day and night. By His decree in Gen 9:6 He protects human life from murder by animals and other people; by his covenant in Gen 9:8-16 with Noah and all his descendants including us, He declares that he will never again destroy animal and human life on earth with another flood. All these divine performative utterances remain in force after the fall until the end of the world. Through them He maintains bodily life on earth. They establish and maintain our right to life. Governments do not give us that right, nor can they abolish it. Instead those who are in government are required to respect it and uphold by their laws, policies, and actions. If they fail

to protect the God-given right to life, they abandon their most fundamental responsibility and forfeit much of their legitimacy.

God also defends human life through His law, natural law that is summarized by the seven commandments in the second table of the Decalogue. He protects the good gifts that He provides for humankind and the right order by which He delivers them to all people on earth – parents and family, physical life and good health, sexual intercourse and marriage, money and property, justice and a good reputation, household as an economic unit with its personal members and its physical assets. So by His law He curbs social disorder and maintains the benevolent order that is necessary for a good human life on earth. In addition He establishes government to enforce His law for the common good of all mankind (Rom 13:1-7).

Even though the descendants of Adam turn away from God and spurn Him, He still offers a relatively good life to them in the order of creation. So if they are law-abiding, clean-living, moral people who respect God's order for the world and human society, they enjoy His earthly blessings. The promise attached to the fourth commandment applies to them; it will be well with them and they will live long on the earth (Deut 5:16). They will have good lives with good families, good marriages, and good communities. They will be able to do good work in order to provide for their families, care for the people around them, and look after the natural world that sustains them. They will be able to enjoy food and drink and all the other good things that God so richly provides for their enjoyment in their bodily life (1 Tim 6:17), for He does not just provide them with their livelihood but also give them the ability to produce wealth (Deut 8:18) and the capacity to enjoy the fruit of their work (Eccl 5:19; 6:2). But all that depends on their respect for the life-giving, life-sustaining order by which God delivers these temporal blessings to them through the natural order and other people in the social order. His ordinances give them their right to life.