

Dignity and choice

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [March 21, 2012](#) issue



*Le bon Samaritain*, by Aimé Morot.

I've picked up Nicholas Wolterstorff's new book, *Justice in Love*, and am reading it slowly, trying to savor each paragraph as he discusses the relationship—which sometime feels like a conflict—between justice and love.

Wolterstorff comments on and critiques Anders Nygren's classic *Agape and Eros* and Reinhold Niebuhr's *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, with its notion that Jesus' ethic is an "impossible possibility." According to Wolterstorff, the basic Christian

ethical concept is that individuals have a right to justice because they are loved by God. He builds his case for a new "care-agapism" in which justice and love, instead of being in conflict, are in harmony with each other and part of one ethical/moral position.

Wolterstorff points to Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, and the striking moral mandate that appears in all three synoptic Gospels: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." That, Jesus said, is the heart of the Torah. "That sums it up," says Wolterstorff.

But how do we move from the core ethical mandate to the excruciatingly complex issues we face in the modern world? How do we proceed from love for God and neighbor to the questions of accessibility to birth control and whether to terminate a pregnancy, to name two matters that are currently before us?

Wolterstorff furthers the discussion by citing Lenn E. Goodman's book *Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself*: "The love that the Torah commands means accepting the sanctity of each person's capacity to choose and to cherish."

That's really the issue in these two difficult questions, isn't it? Goodman elaborates: "Persons must be treated as persons. *Love thy neighbor* makes explicit the obligation that the life of another person sets before us: the measure of *as thyself* spotlights the existential equality of persons—lest we lose sight of the precious dignity of the other."

As the public conversation about contraceptives and abortion continues, someone, it seems to me, ought to be speaking to "the precious dignity of the other" and "the sanctity of each person's capacity to choose."

The basic principle of American life, Nicholas Kristof observed recently, is respect for religious beliefs and "accommodating them where we can." "We should make a good-faith effort to avoid offending Catholic bishops," says Kristof. "But . . . there are other interests at stake. If we have to choose between bishops' sensibilities and women's health, our national priority must be the female half of the population."

There is no absolute biblical mandate on these issues. Those who claim there is are wrong. The one absolute is the mandate to love God and neighbor. It seems to me that that mandate includes both respecting the sanctity of the neighbor and affirming the neighbor's "capacity to choose."