

Human Rights Need God

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In the review article of the book, *Does Human Rights Need God?*, I argued that the *United Nations Declaration of Human Rights* ignores or bypasses the whole question of the ultimate source of human rights. Do human rights need God? Bluntly stated, it depends on your God. Of course, the God question is dismissed by secular humanist and atheists. They argue that human beings create their own truth and morals. They are responsible for their own destiny. They claim that a God sovereign over human affairs is a threat to human freedom and responsibility. But the standard secularist account of autonomous human rights is mistaken.

What is widely overlooked today is that a worldview based on naturalistic evolution cannot provide a reasonable foundation for either the universality or the permanence of human rights. It was precisely this naturalistic theory that underlaid the Nazi repudiation of the inherited Biblical morality of the West. Hitler's anti-Christian program aimed to destroy especially the Confessional Churches. A major means toward that end was to deny the churches any role in the education of the younger generation. And how can relativism, which is so prevalent in the West, guarantee human rights? Jacques Ellul properly warned us that current notions of juridical relativism, cannot protect "the order of society and the established human rights...against arbitrary power' or against totalitarian definition of right and wrong."

The Triune God

Human rights issues are deeply religious issues. Therefore, the God question cannot be avoided. The God of the Bible is Triune. He is the Creator. He is the sovereign God, the supreme Ruler and Lawgiver of the universe. And He is our Father. As the church father, Irenaeus of Lyons (c.130-200) asserts, "He whom the Law proclaimed as God, the same did Christ point out as the Father." This is our Father's world. He has not forsaken His creation. His acts are directed toward the end times. The knowledge that God is at work in history gives us the encouragement and stimulants to promote human rights. God establishes His Kingdom. He seeks justice in the chaos of this sinful world to make life bearable and liveable. He requires attention to both individual righteousness and social justice.

No person, not even an official of society having collective authority, is above God's law or above God's judgment. Therefore, in our practice of human rights we are answerable to God, Who is "the judge of all the earth" (Gen. 18:25). This truth gives the victims of injustice the assurance that in the ultimate scheme of things they do not have to "settle" for the injustice done to them or anybody else. All injustice will be rectified when God 'will judge the world in righteousness" (Ps. 96:13).

But won't this thinking lead to a theocracy? Not if we keep in mind what belongs to God and what belongs to the state. As the church father, Tertullian (c.160-230) pointed out: "Render to Caesar *money*. Render to God, *yourself*. Otherwise, what will be God's, if all things are Caesar's?" In other words, the state does not bestow human rights – its duty is to recognize and safeguard these rights. It must protect not only specific political rights like the question of voting or establishing political parties, but also non-political rights such as the right to worship, of association, of parental choice in education, and so forth.

Biblical Authority

We can make a compelling argument in a secular society for human rights, the rights which are originally from God and finally vindicated by God. Why? Because our view of human rights is grounded in Scripture. "We confess that this Word of God was not sent nor delivered by the will of man, but that men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit, as the apostle Peter says; and that afterwards God, from a special care which He has for us and our salvation, commanded His servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit His revealed word to writing" (*Belgic Confession* Art. 3). The Bible then is the foundation for our thought and action. But does it offer a working perspective of human rights? If so, what is it? It is true that the idea of human rights is nowhere mentioned in the Bible, yet it is present everywhere. The reality of it is integrally woven into the total fabric of its message. The Bible reveals God's will for our personal life as well as for public life and policy. It concerns itself with human thought and action in government no less than in education and culture and in marriage and the family. It reveals God's concern for human dignity and social justice, which becomes the Christian's concern for human dignity and social justice.

God's concern for human righteousness comes in sharp relief on almost every page of prophecy. In the words of Isaiah 5:16, "The Lord God Almighty will be exalted by his justice" (Cf. Isaiah 58:6-7). To deprive the poor of justice is a sin against God. "He who mocks the poor shows contempt for their Maker" (Prov. 17:5). In clear language the Bible speaks to us about right and wrong, about good and evil, about God's law which is finer than gold and sweeter than honey, about doing justice to the poor, the needy, the orphans, and those who have no helper, about not withholding wages of your hired labourer, about showing mercy and doing justice to foreigners and sojourners, about doing good even to your enemies. The Bible speaks of divinely inspired duties, including the Ten Commandments, which, taken to their ultimate conclusion, form the basis of what moderns call human rights. The commandment, "You shall not murder," teaches that human life is sacred and implies that there is a right to life. Thus, the commandments are formulated as human obligations to God and not as explicitly conferring tangible rights or benefits upon humanity. But they do, in fact, provide a philosophical basis for putting a high value on humans. And Jesus said that human duties to God are ultimately reduced to two: Love God with one's whole being, and love others as oneself (Matt. 22:34-40).

The Bible deals with human nature and with personal relationships more than with specific problems. But much of its teaching, nonetheless, expressly bears on public policy concerns. This is seen in the role of the Old Testament prophets. Kings were reminded of their violation of God's law that protected the rights of weaker members of their society. The prophet, Nathan, rebuked King David for violating the rights of Uriah (2 Sam. 12:7-10). Elijah's rebuked King Ahab for violating the right of Naboth (1 Kings 21:17-22). Both Nathan's rebuke and Elijah's rebuke were taken seriously because David and even Ahab were rulers of Israelite society that still recognized God's law and judgment.

What is Man?

The most basic issue at stake in the concern for human rights can be phrased very simply with the question, "What is man?" The undergirding rationale for all human rights is the fact that each one of us has been created in the image of God. We all belong to the one human family. The Roman teacher Lactantius (c.250-325 A.D.) noted, "We call everyone together to the heavenly pasture, without any distinction, either of sex or of age" (cf. Gal. 3:28). Each person is highly valued in the sight of God. In fact, when a person's basic right to life is violated, God's right is violated. The Bible declares that any assault on another person is taken as an assault on God Himself. And He will ultimately vindicate the innocent and punish the criminal (Gen. 9:5-6). This concept of human dignity, as well as the ideas of justice, righteousness, and human freedom (especially freedom from oppression), flows from

Scripture's high view of human beings. Consequently, we insist on the universal dignity, rights and responsibilities of all human beings. When human beings are no longer seen as God's image bearers, they will be treated as mere objects. We are not social animals, products of evolution, or a collection of molecules. As the Christian apologist Tatian (c.160) aptly commented, "Man is not, as the croaking philosophers say, merely a rational animal, capable of understanding and knowing... Rather, man alone is the image and the likeness of God."

The status of a human being does not depend on his or her age, race, size, age of development, or condition of dependency. Each person is made in the image of God, endowed with dignity (Ps. 8). Each human being is, therefore, a person possessed of a dignity we are obliged to respect by virtue of being created in the likeness and image of God. And each person is both an individual and communal creature, who lives beneath God's sovereignty, answerable to His norms of justice, stewardship, and love. The right to dignity demands that we treat all human beings with dignity. This includes protecting the rights of those with whom we disagree.

In much of human rights talk today, little is said about responsibility. We have no rights for rights' sake. Rights are tied to responsibility. We must accept responsibility for what we do. Responsibility is about caring for others. And ultimately the cause of human rights is inseparably bound up with our responsibility to God (Ps. 139). We cannot shirk our duty as Cain did, when he said to God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" As Ed Vanderkloet noted in his essay, *The Iron and the Clay in the Foundations of Human Rights* (1980): "Man is first of all responsible to his Maker; his speech, his association, and all his action must be a response to God. It is here that the Christian and the humanist world-and-life view clash. For the creed of human autonomy does not allow for the element of responsibility to a sovereign God. If man is his own master and lawgiver, he is only responsible to himself."

The Fall of Man

Why will human rights never become a popular cause? Why can't the "reasoned intentions of all men of goodwill" bring about public justice and renewal of society? Why do human beings, made to love God above all and their neighbours as themselves, turn life into death, light into darkness, love into hatred, service into oppression, obedience into exploitation? The reason is that Adam and Eve rebelled against God and were driven out of paradise. Sin now disrupts the good order and harmony of God's creation. As the apologist, Justin Martyr (c.100-165) noted, "The human race...from Adam had fallen under the power of death and the guile of the serpent. Each one had committed personal transgression." The fall of our first parents had a devastating effect on human relationships. Paradise was barely lost when Cain attacked his brother Abel's right to life (Gen. 4:1-16). The *Heidelberg Catechism* is still as relevant now as the day it was written. It confesses that we are "prone by nature to hate God and our neighbour," and are accordingly "wholly incapable of doing good and are inclined to all evil" (q.a. 5, 8). The curse of sinful transgression, of the broken covenant, and of the estrangement from God, fellowmen, and the world, now hangs over all human relationships. But the fall could not and did not destroy our responsibility to God. God maintains his righteous claims upon us even in a broken world. Do human rights need God? Yes, as only God can counter human sin.

Jesus Christ, the God-Man

At the heart of the Christian view of human rights is Jesus Christ. He is God's answer for fallen human beings. In the midst of history is the cross, the liberating power of His resurrection, and His glorious ascension to a position of regal authority. There is no righteousness apart from Him. In Christ, God

became man. As the God-man, the long-awaited Messiah, He reveals perfectly the divine image (Col. 1:15), restoring the image of God in us. The incarnate Divine Word is, therefore, the measure of the fullness of our humanity (Eph. 4:13). By God's grace, this is the firm and final foundation of the exercise, personally and communally, "To all who received him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

The doctrine of the Incarnation demonstrates the ultimate worth of human beings (John 3:16). Jesus Christ, both fully God and fully human, concretely lived in the midst of time and space. Through Jesus, the New Testament shows God's interest in people from all segments of society. Jesus demonstrated respect to the outcasts of society.

How do we practice true religion (James 1:26-27)? We turn to the Bible. It is the Word of Him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6). He is the Way we are to walk, the Truth we are to believe, the Life we are to live. The apostle Paul exhorts us to fulfill "the law of Christ", which means assuming the obligation "to bear one another's burdens" (Gal. 6:2). The claims of love are at the heart of the "law of Christ." As Justin Martyr observed, "All of us pray for you, and for all men, as our Christ and Lord taught us to do. For He commanded us to pray even for our enemies, and to love those who hate us, and to bless those who curse us."

Will we ever gain a world where all human rights are perfectly respected? The Bible is clear. A perfect world will only come when our Lord returns. With one eye scanning the clouds, watchful for our Lord's return, we are to fix our other eye on the needs of our fellow God's image bearers around the world. Therefore, here and now we do what is right in God's sight, "according to his promise we wait for the new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet. 3:13). And Christ entrusts the church with the great commission as the supreme "declaration of human rights" – the right and responsibility of all people to hear and believe the gospel, and the right and responsibility of his disciples to proclaim it (Matt. 28:18-20).

The Church

The Church is the community of saints from every nationality, class, and race. As public light, salt, and leaven, she can make a positive contribution to human rights, showing concern for the public good. As she presents the Gospel of salvation to a spiritually lost world, she has also the task to equip the people of God, both personally and communally, to serve as fervent advocates of justice, peace, and compassion in every sector of life.

And the church has a unique position in the world. When one part of the Church suffers, there will be voices of encouragement from other parts; when another part of the Church becomes too comfortable with status and power, a word of admonition will be forth coming. And the Church has made a difference for good in many parts of the world. For all the ambiguities, foibles, and outright betrayal of Christianity's own best principles, the Word and Deed Gospel has opened the door to the development of dynamic pluralistic democracies which protect human rights of both persons and groups. The record shows that the church opened her heart to the needy, cared for the poor and hungry, ministered to the enslaved and imprisoned, established orphanages and centres of learning, generated movements for societal reform, offered diaconal assistance, and sponsored programs of world relief.

Already in the first centuries of the Christian era, the Church sought the public good. For example, Lactantius wrote, "It is an equally great work of justice to protect and defend orphans and widows who

are destitute and stand in need of assistance. Therefore, the divine law commands this to everyone." Christians opposed and condemned the culturally imbedded custom of child abandonment. The 2nd century church father, Clement of Alexandria, condemned the Romans for saving and protecting young birds and other creatures while lacking moral compunctions about abandoning their own children. But the early Christians did more than condemn child abandonment. They frequently took these child castaways into their homes and adopted them. Despite all the persecutions suffered, they did not relent in promoting the sanctity of human life. Their persistent efforts eventually paid off. When Emperor Valentinian outlawed infanticide in 374, he also criminalized child abandonment.

Conclusion

Do human rights need God? Yes. The infallible Scripture of the Triune God gives shape to human rights issues. Human rights in the Biblical perspective are now rights by the grace of God, recalling us to our task to make things right in this world. When salvation came to his house, Zacchaeus responded: "If I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold" (Luke 19:8). As believers in the pursuit of human rights, we must maintain an independent prophetic voice. "We should realize that the humanist and Christian concepts of justice and rights are as incompatible as iron and clay," noted Vanderkloet. "To build our political order on a foundation of those ingredients [humanist-secular] is acting like the man who built his house upon the sand. Such foundations will crumble and cause the collapse of the structure when the winds and floods of new ideologies arise and beat against it."