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## Human Rights and Responsibilities

Approaching a Biblical Balance

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## Introduction

Many people in today's world suffer greatly, often as the result of other people's action. The powerless often suffer at the hands of others. It is estimated that fifteen million children under the age of five die each year because they don't have enough food, water and medical care; and many of those who do survive are exploited by child labor and child prostitution. Untold numbers of street children are abused or killed by the local police. Millions of refugees and asylum seekers exist under inhumane conditions. The last one hundred years are full of events showing man's inhumanity to man. In the two world wars, approximately sixty million people were killed. Masses have died under their own leaders in Russia, Cambodia, Uganda, and China, as well as many Latin American countries.

How should people respond to facts such as these? In the last century there has been an increasing awareness and promotion of human rights. The concept of human rights is not new. It was already proclaimed in the Bible thousands of years ago. The British, French and American revolutions attempted to protect human dignity and people from abuse at the hands of the leaders and those with power. However after two world wars in the twentieth century it was decided
that more needed to be done to protect peace and human rights. Eglantyne Jebb, who had a Christian faith, witnessed the suffering of children in the First World War and played an important role in drafting the 1924 Declaration of the Rights of the Child. World War Two resulted in the organization of the United Nations in 1945 and the issuing of the International Bill of Human Rights in 1948.

Proponents of human rights have many different claims. First, human rights proponents from a western individualistic background proclaimed rights of the individual such as the right to life; the right to freedom of thought, opinion, conscience and religion; the right to participate in free and frequent elections; the right to equality; the right to privacy and to fairness before the law; and the prohibition of torture, slavery, and arbitrary arrests. Proponents of a more socialist background emphasized the right to work and fair pay, the right to leisure, and the right to form trade unions. Other rights proclaimed by many from different persuasions include the right to education, to proper medical treatment, and to social security.

Yet despite the advances of the human rights movement over the past fifty years there is still a massive amount of suffering and abuse of people. What should be the Christian's approach to these issues? Is proclamation of human rights the correct approach? Should we agree completely with everything that is proclaimed by advocates of human rights? Has the human rights movement gone beyond what is appropriate? This article will seek to show that Christians should be concerned with human rights, although we should make some corrections. For example, we cannot agree with some of the rights that are proclaimed, and we should have a correct balance between human rights and human responsibility. Moreover, the Bible also stresses God's right to rule over us. In order to clarify our thinking it would help to develop a biblical worldview, to understand the world through the teaching of the Bible.

## Biblical worldview

Genesis chapters one and two teach us that God created and sovereignly rules over everything. He created men and women in his image and spoke to them in a relational way. He instructed them in
the form of commands. They should "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground. ${ }^{11}$ God also commands the man to take care of the garden. ${ }^{2}$ These few truths gleaned from these chapters already have a great deal to teach us about the issue at hand. God created us with three kinds of relationships.

1. First with God. We were created to relate to God, to love him, ${ }^{3}$ to obey him, to worship him, etc.
2. We were also created to relate to ourselves and fellow mankind. We are to love mankind. ${ }^{4}$
3. With nature. Our role is to fill the earth, subdue it, enjoy its fruits, and take care of it. ${ }^{5}$
In all these relationships God has bestowed on us human responsibility. We have the responsibility to love and obey God, the responsibility to love our neighbor, the responsibility to rule over and to take care of the earth. Moreover these truths tell of God's rights to rule over us. God has the right to command us, the right to give, the right to take away and the right to judge. ${ }^{6}$ The final judgment is a great proclamation of these truths. Together with responsibility comes accountability. God's act of judgment over all mankind proclaims God's right to rule over us and our accountability for that which he has made us responsible. Therefore throughout the Bible there is a great emphasis on human responsibility.

At the same time the Bible also gives a true foundation for human rights. The fact that God made us in his image also gives mankind great dignity or value. Murder is a great evil because it is killing someone in the image of God.' The human rights tradition has
${ }^{1}$ Gen 1:26.
${ }^{2}$ Gen 2:15.
${ }^{3}$ Matt 22:37.
${ }^{4}$ Matt 22:38.
${ }^{5}$ Gen 1:28ff, 2:15.
${ }^{6}$ See Job 33:4, Ps 68:35; Matt 20:1-16; Ps 9:8.
'Gẹn 9:6.
tried to base human rights on human dignity or value. We see from the Bible that as man is created in the image of God he has that value to establish human rights. One problem for many in the human rights tradition of the twentieth century is that they came from a worldview that said man was not in the image of God but we are just the result of meaningless, purposeless chemical reactions in the past. If that is true then why should humans have any worth? Why should a human have any more rights than a dog or a rock? The biblical teaching that God creates us in his image gives a foundation for human dignity and human rights. The foundation for human rights is creation. Human beings never acquired them nor has any government or any other authority bestowed them. Occasionally governments and authorities simply recognize the dignity and rights that God has already bestowed (although they may not attribute them to God).

## Biblical teaching on defending human rights

There are a few passages that deal specifically with the issue of human rights. ${ }^{8}$ When we read through these we see God has particular concern to defend the cause of the powerless. Human history shows that those with power take advantage of those without it. Hence the rich take advantage of the poor. Adults take advantage of children. There is often much injustice. God is a God of justice who is concerned for his whole creation. Therefore this injustice is displeasing to him and it is godly to defend the rights of the poor, the oppressed, the powerless. Romans 13 teaches that God established governments and authorities to promote law and order, to promote righteousness and justice. Therefore Christians should be concerned that those in authority will indeed promote these and not use their power to oppress the poor and make unjust laws.

## Weaknesses in the human rights movement

Despite the fact that God is concerned with human rights as we have seen above, there are a number of concerns that Christians must have with the human rights movement. Below are listed a few such concerns.

## The abuse of the term "human rights"

Consider the following two cases.
a. In some countries the issue of abortion is very much debated. Those who defend the act of abortion say that women have the right to choose, which means the right to kill their unborn child if that is their choice. What should we Christians believe regarding this? Does anyone have this right? Are we infringing on women's rights if we say they do not have the right to do this? If so, is it wrong to infringe on their rights? It is helpful to remember the biblical worldview that we learned above. God has the right to command us what to do. We do not have the right to rebel against God, but rather God has given us the responsibility to obey him. If God has not given women the right to kill their unborn child then they do not have that right. Christians should defend the rights of unborn babies in the image of God.

The debate regarding abortion and birth control can be quite complicated. What do we do in the situation where the baby is causing great danger to the mother's life? It is beyond the scope of this article to go into depth on this issue. However, whatever stance we make the purpose of the illustration still stands. All Christians should agree that when we approach this issue we should do so within the framework of human responsibility before God, not just the rights of the individual. Even if we are to talk of rights, we must not only think of the woman's rights but also the rights of the unborn child. A woman with child is two human beings, not one. We saw that God defends the cause of the helpless. Who is as helpless as an unborn child who is not seen and whose cry is not heard?
b. Another human right often proclaimed is the right to freedom of religion. Suppose that you evangelize someone but they respond they have a right to follow their own religion. How would you
respond? In some ways it is correct to say freedom of religion is a human right. Every human has the right to follow his conscience with regard to religion without being persecuted or being forced to recant or follow another religion. Each person has the right to make his or her own decision.

But in another sense to say that each person has the right to follow his own religion is misleading. Again we should introduce the biblical concept of human responsibility. Choice of religion is not only a human right, it is a human responsibility. As such we will be held accountable before God for the choice we make. If we choose idols we are guilty before God. If we choose the true God as revealed in the Bible we will be blessed by God. A great example of this is found in Joshua 24:14-24. (Read through several times.) Joshua was the leader of the people and therefore had authority over them. Yet despite having this authority he did not force them to follow God. He exhorted them to serve the true God but also told them that it was their choice. He warned them that they are accountable for their decision so if they follow idols they will come under God's judgment. Likewise, we cannot force people to become Christians. Yet it is our responsibility to witness about the true God and what he has done through his son Jesus, and it is their responsibility to respond with repentance and faith.

The danger of proclaiming human rights without reference to God The examples in point number one above show the danger of proclaiming human rights without considering God's revealed will. Some in the human rights tradition believe there is no authority above man who commands us what to do and believe. If this is true then who can decide what is right and what is wrong? Who can decide what truly constitutes human rights? With no authority above us, the rights proclaimed will mirror the values of the people that proclaim them. Of course the clear danger here is that the values of these people may be misguided with no higher authority to challenge their assumptions. Christians know that our Creator has spoken authoritatively in the Bible and we must submit to his standards. His word is the lamp to our feet that can prevent us from walking into the darkness of moral mayhem.

## The uselessness of proclaiming human rights without fulfilling human responsibility

Let us consider the issue of education. Many proclaim that each child, male or female has a right to education. This is indeed true and very important. However, education is not just a right, it is a responsibility. It is the responsibility of the government to adequately fund education, and the responsibility of teachers and parents to teach the child and encourage him to learn. It is also the responsibility of the child to use his God-given mind as he applies it to learning. If there is an occasional speech proclaiming the right to education, but people do not fulfil their responsibility, then no improvement will be made. However, if proclaiming the right to education leads to people fulfilling their responsibility then progress has been made thanks partly to the proclamation of human rights.

## The danger of proclaiming human rights when the appropriate approach is human responsibility

If you look again at the passages from the Bible listed above dealing with human rights you can see that it teaches us that we should defend the rights of others. It does not call us to defend our own rights, indeed the Christian is sometimes called upon to forgo his own rights. ${ }^{9}$ Both noted passages deal with the issue of love. The two greatest commandments are to love God and love your neighbor. In loving others we must think of our responsibility to them. In loving others sometimes we must defend their rights and forgo our own. In relationships this can be very important.

Consider the most intimate relationship between people: marriage. Let us look at Paul's advice to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:21-31 (read through). Paul does not tell husbands nor wives to defend their own rights. He does not instruct wives to tell their husbañds to fulfil their responsibility, nor the husband to tell his wife to fulfil hers. (This does not mean a husband or wife cannot rebuke each other). Paul's advice to a married couple is that each party makes sure he or she is fulfilling his responsibility to his partner. This is very sound

[^0]advice. It will be beneficial for a marriage if each party strives to be faithful in his or her responsibility to his marriage partner, rather than just thinking about his own rights.

When we consider another relationship within the home, that between the parents and the children we can again see the danger of proclaiming human rights over against human responsibility. The U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child has been involved in promoting children's rights. Some children's rights do need to be defended; however, religious groups have expressed concern that the incorrect proclamation of children's rights will undermine the rights and responsibilities of parents to raise, teach, develop, and discipline their child. For example, a parent disciplining her child with a smack may be accused of infringing the child's rights. A parent giving religious instruction to his child may be considered to be infringing on the rights of the child to make his own choice. Christians should be wary of any future developments such as these.

## The nature of mankind

We have seen that Christians should promote human rights. We hope that promoting human rights will improve this world. Yet at the same time we must not think that this is the ultimate solution to the problems people face. Many believe that people are essentially good in nature and therefore they are optimistic regarding the results from human activities such as proclaiming human rights. Christians should not suffer such a delusion. The Bible clearly teaches that people have a sinful nature and that we are incapable of saving ourselves not only from the penalty we receive due to our sins, but also the power of sin over us. ${ }^{10}$ Human solutions will not fix the problems in this world. But God has acted in Jesus to save us from our sins. The solution to the problems in this world is the gospel. In the gospel God not only forgives us from our sins, but gives us new life to be obedient to him. This gives true hope for a better society. We also wait for the future world when all will be made perfect.

[^1]
## Conclusion

In the face of much suffering in this world Christians should defend the rights of the poor, defenseless and oppressed. We should seek to reform governments, systems, laws, companies, etc., so that people will be treated fairly.

Yet Christians should also be cautious of the abuse of the term "human rights." Christians working with secular organizations should be careful to check that what they are hearing is consistent with the Bible.

When we check with the Bible we realize that it places much more emphasis on human responsibility before God. We should proclaim to the world that they are accountable to God for the responsibilities that he has given them within the three relationships that were outlined above. Nothing is hidden from him; he sees everything right down to inside our hearts. The whole world has rebelled against God and is therefore under his judgement. We are incapable through human solutions or human religion to solve this problem. Yet God has acted to save us through Jesus, particularly what he accomplished in his death and resurrection. In the gospel God calls people to repent of their wrongdoing and believe in Jesus. This will not only bring personal salvation but true transformation of society.

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[^0]:    ${ }^{9}$ E.g., see Matt 5:38-48; 1 Cor 8:1-9:23.

[^1]:    ${ }^{10}$ See Rom 7:7-24; Eph 2:1-3; Jer 13:23; 17:9.

[^2]:    

[^3]:    

