

Human Rights – A Christian Point of View

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, (UDHR), was drafted by a UN committee, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, in 1948, in large part as a reaction to the horrors of World War II. The opening words to its preamble reads: “Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world.” This draws a direct connection between human rights and peace. This should be self-evident, but the problem is that an understanding of what constitutes human rights can vary from person to person, group to group, nation to nation. For us, the question has to be, how should we view human rights from a Christian point of view?

We can begin by looking at the phrase in UDHR, “inherent dignity”. Out of what does such dignity arise? From a Judeo-Christian perspective it is derived from the *‘imago Dei’*, i.e., the biblical claim that human beings are created in the image of God, an assertion that appears three times in the Book of Genesis. Nicholas Wolterstorff (Professor of Philosophical Theology Emeritus at Yale), writes, “God loves redemptively all who bear the *imago Dei* - loves them equally and loves them perpetually. It is the worth we have on account of being so honored by God those grounds natural human rights.” It is unfortunate that the idea that **all** bear that image is so often ignored throughout the world. (One example - apart from the obvious human rights violations in Ukraine, it has recently been reported that blacks and Africans who live in Ukraine and are trying to flee the inhumanity and destruction, are being segregated from white refugees at some borders, and some are being refused the right to cross the borders.) Race, ethnicity, religion, gender, etc., have no bearing on who bears the *imago Dei*; therefore, **all** possess ‘inherent dignity’ and “equal and inalienable rights”, the foundation of human rights.

We can also look to the Sermon on the Mount. The fourth beatitude reads, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” Likewise, we find in the eighth beatitude, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The word ‘righteousness’ is very often perceived as referring to an individual’s good and right behavior, but it goes beyond that and is best interpreted as meaning justice; with justice being equated with freedom. In Jesus’ time and place, justice certainly meant freedom from oppression, as the Israelites suffered under the tyranny of the Roman Empire. Such justice would entail freedom of thought and speech, freedom from persecution, freedom of religion, freedom from violence, etc. In the eighth beatitude Jesus ties righteousness, i.e., justice, together with the kingdom of heaven, understood as the establishment of God’s justice on Earth - a justice pertaining to all bearing the image of God.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights offers us an ideal vision of how we would want the world to be, where the “inherent dignity” of all is recognized and accepted, yet not only are there varying ideas on what human rights are, but there are those who bear hostility towards them. But we must not despair. We must hope, pray, and strive towards creating a new reality - as Lincoln said in Second Inaugural Address, “to do all which may achieve and cherish, a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations,”

Peace, grace, and love, David