

**THE  
CHRISTIAN  
AND  
PERSECUTION**

Theological Approaches  
to Human Rights

**MODULE 5**



# **Lesson Five: Theological Approaches to Human Rights**

## **Learning Objective:**

By the end of this lesson the students will have an understanding of the theological bases for human rights concern and activism. They will be equipped to counter common objections, articulated within some Christian circles, to involvement in human rights advocacy and challenged towards proactive engagement in promoting justice with compassion.

## **Preparatory Bible Reading:** Isaiah 58

## **Lesson Outline:**

Introduction

1. Human Rights in Christian Perspective
    - a. The theological underpinnings of human rights declarations
    - b. Support for human rights in core Christian doctrines:
      - i. Doctrine of God
      - ii. Doctrine of Salvation
      - iii. Doctrine of Man
      - iv. Doctrine of the Kingdom
      - v. Doctrine of Ethics
      - vi. Doctrine of Government
      - vii. Doctrine of Sin/Evil
  2. Countering Christian objections to human rights
    - a. Human rights is a secular concept
    - b. Standing up for your rights goes against biblical teaching
    - c. Human rights advocacy is a form of 'social gospel'
    - d. The church should not become involved in politics
  3. The imperatives of justice and love
- Conclusion

## **Case Study/Learning Activity**

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## **Lesson Five**

### **Theological Approaches to Human Rights**

*There is a strong biblical support for the concept of human rights, and a clear mandate for promoting and advocating for the human rights of all.*

#### **Introduction**

In this lesson we will discuss a Christian view on human rights and the call of Christians to be involved in advocating for human rights. We will first define what is meant by human rights. We will then consider the Biblical mandate for human rights involvement before looking at some objections that have been raised by Christians against the concept of human rights or human rights advocacy. Finally, we will summarise the distinctly Christian perspective on human rights.

The issue of human rights has always generated debate. These debates include both the concept of human rights (e.g. what are the foundations of human rights? are human rights universal?) and the content of human rights (e.g. which issues can be considered human rights? can human rights be ranked according to importance?). Many of these wider issues are beyond the scope of this module.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to briefly define human rights, as this is relevant for our consideration of the Christian mandate, and also for the discussion of some of the objections against human rights involvement.

When we use the term “human rights” in this module we are referring to “Those basic standards without which people cannot live in dignity. To violate someone’s human rights is to treat that person as though she or he were not a human being. To advocate human rights is to demand that the human dignity of all people be respected.”<sup>2</sup>

Human rights advocacy involves protecting the rights (and therefore the dignity) of the weak against the strong.

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<sup>1</sup> For summaries of these discussions see: Norman E. Bowie & Robert L. Simon, *The Individual and the Political Order: an Introduction to Social and Political Philosophy* (New Jersey, 1986), James W. Nickel, *Making Sense of Human Rights: Philosophical Reflections on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Berkeley, 1987), Jerome J. Shestack, “The Philosophic Foundations of Human Rights” in: *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 20, Nr.2 (1998), p. 201-234, Barbara de Mori, “What Moral theory for human rights?”, *Etica & Politica*, Vol II, nr. 1 (2000), retrieved on January 10, 2006 from: [http://www.univ.trieste.it/~etica/2000\\_1/demori.htm](http://www.univ.trieste.it/~etica/2000_1/demori.htm), Rasa Ostrauskaite, “Theorizing foundations of human rights”, *Rubikon*, December 2001, retrieved on June 14, 2006 from <http://venus.ci.uw.edu.pl/~rubikon/forum/rasa1.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Flowers (ed), “Human Rights Fundamentals”, in: *Human Rights Here and Now* (1999), retrieved October 02, 2006, from <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/edumat/hreduseries/hereandnow/Part-1/whatare.htm>. See also Norman E. Bowie & Robert L. Simon, opus cit., p. 72-3, where human rights (referred to as positive natural rights) are defined as: “those entitlements whose protection and implementation are needed to safeguard human dignity, autonomy and respect.”

## 1. Human Rights in Christian Perspective

*The core of the modern human rights concept has roots in biblical faith*

### 1.a. Theological underpinnings of human rights declarations

When human rights are mentioned, many people think of the human rights as codified in the modern human rights documents of the United Nations and different treaties and documents issued by regional political bodies.<sup>3</sup> These are products of the modern period in the history of human rights which started in the time of the French and American Revolutions. These revolutions produced the French 'Declaration of the Rights of Men and of the Citizen' (1789) and the American Declaration of Independence (1776)<sup>4</sup> respectively. These documents are considered to be the first modern human rights documents.

However, it does not follow that the concept of human rights dates from this period. These declarations were the culmination of centuries of thought about the concepts of justice and protection for the weak against the strong and also the rights and obligations of the ruler vis-à-vis his subjects.<sup>5</sup>

The oldest known texts where these issues are mentioned (and which explicitly mention the need to protect the weak against the strong) are considered to be the Codex Hammurabi<sup>6</sup> and the Pentateuch.

Even though the term 'human rights' doesn't appear anywhere in the Bible, many, even non-Christians, believe that the concept of human rights is derived from, or is at least heavily dependent on Biblical roots. Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher quotes many who hold this view, including Karl Marx!<sup>7</sup>

René Cassin, one of the members of the original United Nations Human Rights Commission which drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stated: "The concept of human rights comes from the Bible, from the Old Testament, from the Ten Commandments."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In the Arab World the most relevant regional documents would be: the Arab Charter of Human Rights (Arab League), the African Charter of People's and Human Rights (African Union), the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (Organization for the Islamic Conference) and the Barcelona Declaration (Euro-Mediterranean Partnership).

<sup>4</sup> The official title is "Unanimous Declaration of the thirteen United States of America". The text can be found at: [http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/declaration\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/declaration_transcript.html). The text of the Declaration of the Rights of Men and of the Citizen can be found at:

<http://www.hrcr.org/docs/frenchdec.html>

<sup>5</sup> See Micheline R. Ishay, *The History of Human Rights: from Ancient Times to the Globalization Era* (Berkeley, 2004)

<sup>6</sup> The codex was written in approx 1760 BC. It was one of the first laws which explicitly stated the aim of the law was to defend the weak against the strong. The text can be found at:

[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Codex\\_Hammurabi](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Codex_Hammurabi)

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Schirrmacher, *Mission und der Kampf um die Menschenrechte* (Hamburg, 2001), p. 15-26

<sup>8</sup> Micheline R. Ishay, *The History of Human Rights: from Ancient Times to the Globalization Era* (Berkeley, 2004), p. 6

Dr. Stackhouse, during a lecture organized by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, concluded: “Still, intellectual honesty demands recognition of the fact that what passes as ‘secular,’ ‘western’ principles of basic human rights developed nowhere else than out of key strands of the biblically-rooted religions.”<sup>9</sup>

Dr. Barbara Ann Rieffer, in a book review on two books on religion and human rights, referred to the Old Testament when she wrote: “It is in this initial formulation of the inherent dignity of every human being and duties to others in which we see the origins of the idea of human rights which was eventually ratified and incorporated into international law in the 20th century.”<sup>10</sup> This list of examples is by no means exhaustive.

### **1.b. Support for human rights in core Christian doctrines**

Doctrines which contribute to a Christian understanding of and foundation for human rights include the doctrines of God, Salvation, Man, the Kingdom, Ethics, Government and Sin.

#### i. Doctrine of God<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the Bible, God is described as a God who loves all people and who has a special concern for the poor, the weak and the oppressed. His concern for the poor and oppressed, and his desire for justice are part of his character. He is known by His justice (Psalm 9:16), He loves justice (Psalm 11:7, 33:5), righteousness and justice are the foundations of his throne or of his reign (Psalm 89:14, 97:2).

This is shown throughout the Bible in his actions. He works justice for all the oppressed (Psalm 103:6), He sees trouble and grief and is the helper of the fatherless (Psalm 10:14) and He is a refuge for the oppressed (Psalm 9:9). He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow and loves the alien (Deuteronomy 10:18). Finally, this is also reflected in His laws and commands (see also under Doctrine of Ethics and Doctrine of the Kingdom). God commands His people to seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow (Isaiah 1:17) and to defend the cause of the weak and the fatherless, maintain the rights of the poor and the oppressed and rescue the weak and needy from the hand of the wicked (Psalm 82: 3-4).

The last point shows that God's character and concern for justice and protection for the weak should also be the concern of God's people. All through the prophets Israel, both the rulers and people, are rebuked for disobeying these commands (e.g. Amos, Isaiah 58).

#### ii. Doctrine of salvation<sup>12</sup>

The social gospel movement redefined salvation in socio-political terms. Salvation became economic and political liberation. Biblical references to reconciliation between

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<sup>9</sup> Max L. Stackhouse, Sources of Basic Human Rights Ideas: A Christian Perspective, 2003, retrieved on December 11, 2006, from: <http://pewforum.org/events/index.php?EventID=38>

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Ann Rieffer, “Religion, Politics and Human Rights: Understanding the Role of Christianity in the promotion of Human Rights”, in: Human Rights & Human Welfare, Volume 6, 2006, p. 37

<sup>11</sup> For more details see LOP 3, section 5A; Schirmacher, p.26-27; Tear Fund, p.71

<sup>12</sup> For more details see LOP 3, section 5a; Vinoth, p 3-4; Barry, p. 3-6; LOP 33, p. 15, Tear Fund, p.70

man and God were reinterpreted and applied to reconciliation between men and evangelism was reinterpreted to become social action. However, many have objected that this movement has little to do with the full Biblical teaching on salvation as it reduces the relevance of the biblical message to only our horizontal relationships with other people. Jesus' role seems to be limited to being a revolutionary example, and the issue of personal sin and its spiritual consequences seems ignored.

In reaction to these ideas, conservative<sup>13</sup> Christians, especially in the West, began to define salvation in individualistic terms. Salvation was narrowed down to changing people into religious individuals who cut themselves off from the world in order to enjoy the benefits of their salvation, the most important part of which was the endless life of the individual soul in heaven.

Increasingly, Christians in parts of the world where economic exploitation and political oppression of the weak is widespread felt this individualistic definition is a reduction of God's purpose in salvation as it is brought to us in the Bible. They believe that the religious aspect is indispensable, but that this is not the only aspect of salvation. They recognize that salvation involves the totality of life and aims at the transformation of the whole of creation.

Romans 8:18-25 points out that it is not only humans, but the whole of creation which is groaning under the results of sin and waiting to be liberated from its bondage. Ephesians 1 asserts that God's aim is to bring all things in heaven and on earth together again under one head (Christ, see v. 10). In Colossians 1 Paul explains that by Jesus' death on the cross God wanted to reconcile all things, whether in heaven or on earth, to Himself.

So the results of the fall were not limited to just the relationship between man and God. The fall also had devastating effects on man's relationship with himself, his fellow man, the environment and the spirit world (see also doctrine 7). The above-mentioned verses indicate that the redemption Jesus brought is to involve all of these areas.

Salvation involves deliverance from evil, destroying the works of the evil one (1 John 3:8). It is not limited to the religious aspects of life, but involves all aspects of life, including oppressive and abusive human relationships.

### iii. Doctrine of man<sup>14</sup>

The idea of human rights presupposes that something in a human makes him valuable and worthy of protection. Something sets him apart from the rest of creation. That is why most people would agree it is permissible to kill and eat animals, but these same people would agree that killing a human being and eating him would be a reprehensible act deserving of severe punishment.

Human rights grants people the right to freedom of expression, religion, privacy, assembly, etc. Not many people would advocate these same rights for animals or other parts of creation. It is generally accepted that there is something that makes humans

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<sup>13</sup> 'Conservative' here means the opposite of liberal.

<sup>14</sup> See also Stott, p. 144-149; Wentzel, p. 438; Bos, p. 77-78; Schirrmacher, p. 23-24; LOP 3, section 5a; Dipti, p. 3-4 & 9-11; LOP 33, p. 15-16

unique and sets them apart. In the language of human rights, this is usually referred to as human dignity. From a Biblical perspective what sets man apart from the rest of creation is that man is created in God's image (Genesis 1:26). This fact also makes man worthy of protection (Genesis 9:6, James 3:9).

Another important concept of human rights is equality. From a human rights perspective every human being has equal right and is entitled to equal protection. The biblical notion that man's dignity is derived from his being created in God's image reinforces the equality of all mankind. Man is not worthy of protection because of any unique characteristic that sets him apart from other human beings (sex, socio-economic status, etc). What gives him dignity is something that all humans share in equal measure.

A further relevant aspect of the biblical view of man is the unity of body, soul and spirit. The bible teaches man is composed of a body, soul and spirit.<sup>15</sup> Although the bible sometimes distinguishes between these three, it never separates them. The bible has a holistic view of man. Spirit, soul and body are all inseparable and important parts of a person. It follows that man has many different needs which are all important. Basic needs include fellowship with God, but also food, clothing, love, sense of dignity, hope, etc.

James acknowledges this when he writes: "Suppose your brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." (James 2:15-17).

#### iv. Doctrine of the Kingdom<sup>16</sup>

When Jesus came to earth he came to inaugurate the Kingdom (Matthew 3:8; see also Acts 1:3). The Kingdom is the reign of God, the "inbreaking of God's will over all of God's Creation."<sup>17</sup> To receive Christ is to be born again into his kingdom (John 3:3,5). To be a citizen of God's kingdom is to be submissive to his righteous rule. As such, we are under obligation to exhibit the righteous standards of the kingdom in our own lives. For Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount that members of his kingdom must "hunger and thirst for righteousness" and exhibit a righteousness which exceeds the shallow, formal righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:6,20). He also said that we must "seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33) and pray for God's Kingdom to come (Matthew 6:10); that is, we must set these things before us as the supreme good to which we devote our lives. We must seek not only the spread of the kingdom itself, nor only to exhibit its righteousness ourselves, but also to spread its righteousness in the midst of an unrighteous world.

Although we cannot simply take the Old Testament socio-political commandments, given to the theocratic state of Israel, and apply them to our lives today, these commandments and laws give us a picture of society as God intended it to be. Israel was to be a society based on justice (Deuteronomy 16:19-20), economic equality and

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<sup>15</sup> Sometimes the bible has a more dualistic view and only distinguishes between the inner and outer man.

<sup>16</sup> See also Linthicum, p. 26-40; Wentsel, p. 439; Bos, p. 73-76; Mission as; LOP 3, section 5a; Kärkkäinen, p. 83-84; Vinoth; Tear Fund, p. 70

<sup>17</sup> Kärkkäinen, p. 83.

the protection of the weak and vulnerable (Deuteronomy 15).<sup>18</sup> A large proportion of the books of the prophets contain God's rebuke for Israel's having failed to obey these laws and their oppression and exploitation of the weak and vulnerable (e.g. Isaiah 58, Amos, Micah).

#### v. Doctrine of ethics<sup>19</sup>

All of the doctrines mentioned so far have implications for Christian behaviour (ethics), which we need not repeat here. However, it is important to briefly consider the command that Jesus calls the 'greatest' (Matthew 22:38-39) and 'the most important' (Mark 12:29-31). The command on which all of the Law and the Prophets hang (Matthew 22:40): love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and love your neighbour as yourself.

The bible teaches that you cannot obey the first part of this command (love God) but not the second (love your neighbour). John in his first letter regularly links loving God with loving your neighbour. He strongly states that if we don't love one another we don't know God (1 John 4: 7-8) and that if someone says he loves God but doesn't love his brother is a liar (1 John 4: 20). John summarizes this teaching saying: "[God ] has given us this command: whoever loves God must also love his brother."

When Jesus was asked what it means to love your neighbour he replied with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). In the parable Jesus shows that the commandment to love does not only apply to your friends, but also to those you consider your enemies (see also Luke. 6:27-36). He puts the command to love in the context of helping a man who fell victim to an act of violence and is left weak and vulnerable.

#### vi. Doctrine of the government<sup>20</sup>

Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17 explain that God instituted government with the following mandate:

- to commend what is right (Romans 13:3, 1 Peter 2:14)
- to punish those who do wrong (Romans 13:3-4, 1 Peter 2:14)
- to promote human well-being (Romans 13:4)

In Old Testament times God used the prophets to rebuke Israel or the king when they organized society or exercised their powers in violation of his commandments (see also the doctrines of God and the Kingdom above).

In the New Testament Jesus did the same (e.g. Mark 11:15-17; Luke 11:37-53, Matthew 9:9-13, 12:1-14).

In current times the church has a similar prophetic role to remind governments of their mandate to commend what is right, to punish what is wrong and to seek the well-being of their population. Since most countries no longer operate as theocracies and the

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<sup>18</sup> For a more elaborate review of this view see Linthicum, p. 17-40

<sup>19</sup> See Wentsel, p. 439-440; Dipti, p. 5-6.

<sup>20</sup> See also Wentsel, p. 439; Bos, p. 75; Schirmacher, p.29-30; Vorster, p. 5 and Tear Fund, p. 82-83



authorities now largely base their authority on secular concepts of democracy and the rule of law, the church should not limit itself to using only the biblical language of Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 in their role in society. In many cases the language of justice, equality and human rights can also be helpful vocabulary to use.

#### vii. Doctrine of Sin/Evil<sup>21</sup>

We saw earlier that the results of the fall were not limited to the relationship between man and God, but that all of creation fell at that time, coming under the rule of Satan (1 John 5:19; John 14:30). This does not only include the people who inhabit the world (Ephesians 2:2), but also for the structures of this world (Galatians 4:8-9; Colossians 2:8,15,20; Ephesians 6:12).

As a result, we live in an egoistic world in which many seek to get their own way and fulfil their own desires, even if at the expense of the needs of other people. It is a world where there is injustice and exploitation of the poor, marginalized and weak.

Our societies needs laws to keep people accountable and to protect the weak and vulnerable against those who are stronger. There is a need for national laws to protect individuals and groups and also international law that protects weaker nations from more powerful nations.

#### **Review and discussion questions**

- a. What is the main objective of human rights declarations?
- b. How does preserving human dignity accord with the biblical principles of justice and equality? Explain in a few sentences.
- c. Genesis 2 presents in narrative form the origins and results of sin. Extract from the text the statements that show the pervasive nature of human rebellion against God.

## **2. Countering Christian objections to human rights**

*There are coherent biblical answers to objections against human rights advocacy*

Christian involvement in social action in general, and human rights advocacy in particular, have received many objections from within some conservative Christian circles. We do not have space to consider all of these arguments, though the following sources give a good overview.

Tim Chester cites twenty “barriers to embrace integral mission.”<sup>22</sup> He gives a very brief rebuttal to each. Most of these would apply to involvement in justice and human rights issues as well. In their Advocacy Toolkit, Tear Fund mention eight reasons given against

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<sup>21</sup> See Wentsel, p. 438-439; Schirmacher, p. 23 and M.J. Erickson, “Social Dimension of Sin” in: Christian Theology (Grand Rapids, 1987), p. 641-658

<sup>22</sup> Tim Chester, Barriers to the Embrace of Integral Mission (July 2004), p.4

church involvement in human rights advocacy.<sup>23</sup> They also give a very brief response to each objection.

Here, we shall briefly discuss four objections against Christian involvement in human rights advocacy. The first two deal with the concept of human rights and the second two involve participation in human rights advocacy.

### **2.a. Human rights is a secular concept**

This objection considers human rights a modern invention of the 18th century Enlightenment and (secular) Liberalism movements. It considers human rights to be firmly grounded in individual autonomy and self-determination. It objects to the apparently increasing tendencies for human rights categories to be used to defend behaviour that many Christians deem sinful, and for these categories to be used at times against Christians when they speak out. These clashes mainly occur in the areas of right to life (for example in debates about abortion and euthanasia), sexual orientation rights and rights of the family. Some would add to this list freedom of expression (no limits on insulting religion or adherents of religion) and religious freedom (confusing the separation of church and state with the banning of religion from the public sphere).<sup>24</sup>

One recent example of this problem involves municipal civil servants in the Netherlands and the issue of same-sex marriages. A discussion has re-started whether civil servants have the right to refuse to conduct a same-sex marriage (but have a colleague perform the marriage instead) because the civil servant believes performing the marriage goes against his religion. Until recently, civil servants did not have this right and were fired if they refused to perform the marriage. A change in government led to a change in this policy such that the government does now allow civil servants to refuse to conduct such ceremonies on grounds of conscience.

In this paper we have noted that the concept of human rights is supported by several Christian doctrines. Many experts also believe that the Judeo-Christian values played a very important role in the development of human rights thought.

In the worldwide church today there are many evangelical movements who are inspired by God and motivated by their faith to be involved in human rights advocacy. Here are two brief example from China and Latin America:

- Tony Carnes and Sarah Schafer wrote two articles in 2006 describing the work of Christian human rights lawyers in China.<sup>25</sup> They mention how they founded

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<sup>23</sup> Tear Fund, *Advocacy Toolkit: Understanding Advocacy* (Teddington, 2002), p.73. Available at: <http://tilz.tearfund.org/~media/Files/TILZ/Publications/ROOTS/English/Advocacy%20toolkit/Advocacy%20toolkitEFULL%20DOCParts%20AB.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> See Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Human Rights and the Pastoral Mission of the Church* (Vatican City, 1998), p. 17

<sup>25</sup> See Tony Carnes, "China's New Legal Eagles: Evangelical Lawyers Spur Civil Rights Movement Forward" in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 50, No. 9, September 2006. retrieved on September 19, 2006, from: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/009/39.106.html> and Sarah Schafer and Jonathan Ansfield, "Strength from their Faith: More Civic Activists are becoming Christian and Finding Support for their Causes in the Bible", in *Newsweek International*, July 24, 2006 issue. Retrieved on July 30, 2006 from: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/13879416/site/newsweek/?rf=nwnewsletter>

the Human Rights Protection Movement, how they travel around to teach and challenge Christians and poor farmers to stand up for their rights, about their vision for reform in China and how they find inspiration for all their activities in their faith in Jesus Christ.

- Alexa Smith describes in her recent article how numerous Protestant pastors and lay workers in Colombia operate social programs to help the poor, advocate for human rights for the weak and are involved in efforts to promote peace in the country.<sup>26</sup> She also mentions how these Christian workers are inspired and strengthened by their faith.

Many other examples could be cited. The people involved in these examples believe they are mandated by scripture to be involved in human rights activism, and their faith inspires them in their activities. They are driven by compassion for those who are marginalized and suffering in their societies and believe God has given them the mandate and the mission to challenge people to stand up for their own rights.

As should be clear from these arguments and examples, there are strong grounds for rejecting the assertion that the concept of human rights is incompatible with Christian doctrine or practice. However, it remains the case that secular views on the content of human rights can be problematic from a Christian perspective, and we have noted examples. Although it is beyond our scope to give more detailed reflection on how a Christian view of the concept of human rights influences the content of human rights, we can note two examples of Christian approaches on this issue:

- A Christian Natural Rights approach: rights are derived from the fact that we are created in God's image. Therefore what gives us dignity and enables us to live life fully as it is intended by God is defined by God's standards. "Human rights are not unlimited rights, as if we were free to be and do absolutely anything we like. They are limited to what is compatible with being the human person God made us and intended us to be."<sup>27</sup>
- A Christian Utilitarian approach. Secular utilitarian theory defines the righteousness of actions by how they contribute to the 'common good'. This in turn is defined as the happiness of as large as possible a number of individuals. Others have suggested that the common good of society is more than the sum of the private good of each of the individual members. "The common good embraces the values, institutions, law and structures that regulate, in accordance with justice, the interaction of individuals and groups in society and protect them from oppression or exploitation by the powerful."<sup>28</sup> This approach requires an overarching worldview to define the common good. For Christians that worldview would be based on and defined by God's revelation.

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<sup>26</sup> Alexa Smith, 'Death-Defying Ministry: Protestant leaders practice grassroots justice--and keep a low profile' in: Christianity Today, February 2007, retrieved on February 6, 2007 from: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/40664>

<sup>27</sup> Stott, p. 145

<sup>28</sup> Gregory Baum, "Catholic Foundations of Human Rights", 2006

## **2.b. The concept of standing up for your rights goes against biblical teaching**

This position holds that in Christianity it is taught that instead of demanding rights, one should give them up willingly (Matthew 5:39-44). Paul gave up some of his rights as an apostle for the sake of the gospel (e.g. 1 Corinthians 9). Another example is Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians that they should rather accept being wronged than start a lawsuit against a brother (1 Corinthians 6:1-11). Finally the bible commands Christians not to seek revenge when we are wronged, but instead do good against the wrongdoer and overcome evil with good (Romans 12: 17-21).

The most common rebuttal of this statement is that the bible makes the distinction between our own rights and the rights of other people. The bible emphasizes our responsibility for the rights of other people while calling on us to be willing to forego our own. John Stott summarizes this position well when he concludes: "The Bible says much about defending other people's rights, but little about defending our own. [...] The renunciation of our own rights, however unnatural and idealistic it may seem, is an essential characteristic of God's new society."<sup>29</sup>

It seems clear that there is a strong biblical mandate for standing up for the rights of others. We can also concur that, as Christians, we should be willing to forego our rights when to do so serves a higher purpose (e.g. Philippians 1:12-14). However we need not agree with the assertion that we should never stand up for our own rights. The apostle Paul stood up for his personal rights as a Roman citizen on several occasions, and it can be strongly argued that there are times when standing up for our own rights serves a higher purpose.

Challenging an unjust law or practice that violates our own rights may contribute to a change in the law or practice, from which other people will also then benefit. Likewise challenging individuals or groups when they act unjustly towards us, even to the extent of seeking their punishment through legal channels, may lessen their motivation (or even their ability) to commit the same violation against someone else. In most countries in the Middle East and North Africa there is significant risk in challenging government officials or others in positions of authority. We cannot with integrity encourage other people to stand up for their rights (and face the risks), while refusing to do so ourselves.

## **2.c. Involvement in human rights advocacy is a form of 'social gospel' and distracts from the true calling of the church.**

We considered above how the doctrine of salvation in fact supports the concept of human rights. We noted that the 'social gospel' theology is a travesty of the biblical theology of salvation (and several other doctrines as well). However, we also noted the shortcomings of an opposite view which limits the object of God's salvation to only the religious aspect of the life of individual people and which limits the calling of the church to only addressing the religious needs of people through verbal gospel proclamation.

While the religious aspect of salvation ('being made right with God') is an indispensable aspect of salvation, the richness of God's salvation is not limited to that single aspect.

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<sup>29</sup> Stott, p. 149

Likewise, while the verbal proclamation of the gospel message is a crucial part of the calling of the church and individual Christians, our call is wider than this.<sup>30</sup>

The notion that social action is a watering down of the gospel to the 'social gospel' theology is a fairly recent thought among Christians, which started in the early 20th century. However, the church has a very long history of involvement in social issues and helping the weak and vulnerable. For example, even in the days of the early church, Christians were known for this compassionate engagement. In a letter written in AD360 the (pagan) Roman Emperor Julian writes in his letter to a pagan priest how the Christians care for the poor, both Christian and non-Christian, have advanced their cause and how this shames the pagans who did no such thing.<sup>31</sup> John Stott in his book "Issues facing Christians Today" gives a good overview of the churches' concern for and involvement in social issues throughout more the recent history of the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>32</sup>

### ***2.d. The church should not become involved in politics, but "render to Caesar what is Caesar's" (Matthew 22:21)***

This objection usually takes one (or more) of three forms:

#### a. Jesus didn't mix religion & politics, neither should the church

The word 'politics' can have a more narrow meaning or a broader meaning. It is true that Jesus never founded a political party or had an explicit political program (the narrow meaning). However, His teachings have many implications for how people relate to each other. The Bible gives a lot of guidance as to how people should live together (the broader meaning).<sup>33</sup> Politics in the latter meaning of the word is definitely not only "Caesar's" according to the bible. Jesus himself called the second greatest command the imperative to love our neighbour (Matthew 22: 39) and Paul calls it the fulfilment of the entire law (Romans 13: 8-10).

#### b. We belong to Kingdom of God; this kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36)

It is true that we are not of this world (John 17:16), but citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20). However, John also reminds us that, although we are not of the world, we are sent into this world (John 17: 15, 18). Here we are called to be salt and light and be a positive influence in the world (Matthew 5:13-16). Many of the Biblical doctrines discussed earlier also effectively counter this objection.

#### c. We are called to obey government, not oppose it (Rom 13 and 1 Pet.2)

Indeed, the Bible teaches that the authorities are established by God (Romans 13:1). They are God's instrument to punish evildoers, commend those who do right and promote general well-being. However, the Bible contains many examples of

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<sup>30</sup> See section on 'Doctrine of salvation' for more details of my argument.

<sup>31</sup> The text of the letter can be found at: <http://www.thenagain.info/Classes/Sources/Julian.html>

<sup>32</sup> Stott, p. 2-6

<sup>33</sup> Merriam Webster defines politics in the wider sense as: "the total complex of relations between people living in society."

disobedience when the authorities' laws or commands go against God's law or God's purpose for the government.<sup>34</sup>

In the Old Testament there are numerous examples, e.g. the Hebrew midwives who hide the Hebrew babies (Exodus 1), Moses as he brings the Israelites out of Egypt (Exodus 5-14), Daniel's three friends (Daniel 3) and Daniel himself (Daniel 6). In the New Testament you can find examples of civil disobedience, e.g. the Magi who disobey King Herod, and the disciples who refuse the order from the Jewish leaders no longer to preach Jesus (Acts 4:19 and Acts 5:29).

As noted above when considering the doctrine of the government, the church has a prophetic role to challenge governments when they fail to fulfil their God-given mandate.

### **Review and discussion questions**

- a. In addition to the four objections to human rights advocacy mentioned in this section, give two other that you think Christians may voice as they shy away from this mandate.
- b. List some of what secular advocates may consider rights that conflict with biblical teachings. Justify your answer from the scriptures.
- c. How would you see your church community participating in the politics of your local government, while standing up for the rights of its individuals? Describe in a paragraph or two, giving specific examples and challenges.

### **3. The imperatives of justice and love**

*Christ is the true foundation of human rights ideals, such as freedom, justice, and peace*

We have considered the theological bases for Christian human rights concern and activism, including responses to some common objections to Christian involvement. Although we have stressed the strong biblical mandate for human rights, we have also acknowledged that some aspects of prevalent secular understandings of human rights can be problematic for Christians.

The doctrinal positions we have examined provide a firm foundation for Christians to articulate and to demonstrate a distinctly Christian approach to human rights.

At the heart of that distinctly Christian approach must be the person of Christ. As considered in detail above, foundational to the biblical approach to human rights is the

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<sup>34</sup> For examples and a more elaborate defence of Christian's involvement in civil disobedience see John H. Redekop, Christians and Civil Disobedience (Background Paper from the Evangelical Fellowship in Canada), 2001, retrieved on March 23, 2002 from: [http://files.efc-canada.net/gen/CivilDisobedience\\_2008.pdf](http://files.efc-canada.net/gen/CivilDisobedience_2008.pdf)

work of God in creation (making mankind in his image) and his justice (which in turn demands justice). But equally foundational is the work of Christ in redemption (the universal sufficiency of his sacrifice) and his love (which in turn demands love). It is in Christ that the justice and mercy of God are perfectly demonstrated.

In considering the redemptive work of Christ and the imperative for love which he has instituted, there emerge some fundamental discontinuities between a biblical perspective and the modern concept of human rights.

A key discontinuity is the contrasting view of man. The modern human rights concept increasingly asserts the basic dignity of the individual as self-evident, without reference to whence that dignity derives, so demonstrating “a humanistic optimism in the inherent goodness of the human person and in his or her capacity for responsibility and freedom.”<sup>35</sup> But from a biblical perspective this optimism is misplaced, belying a high view of man which fails to resonate with the biblical doctrine of mankind’s inherent sinfulness. (Paradoxically, the United Nations human rights instruments emerged following the Second World War specifically so as to provide a pragmatic and enforceable counter to potentially abusive governments; an implicit acknowledgment that any inherent human goodness can diminish within those whom power has corrupted).

It is because of the inherent sinfulness of mankind that Christ’s redemption was necessary. By achieving “restoration of men [sic] to their creaturely status as servants of God,”<sup>36</sup> his redemptive work is foundational to a biblical understanding of rights. A root of all human rights, therefore, is the authority to be children of God given to all people by God’s grace through Christ.<sup>37</sup> Because of the universal sufficiency and 'once-for-all-time' nature of Christ's redemption (John 3:16, Hebrews 7:27), we can assert the application of rights on this basis to those outside the covenant people of God.

As we have noted in previous sections, the love which Christ demonstrated in providing redemption is a sacrificial love that should also characterise inter-human relationships (John 13:34). This love is central to a biblical understanding of rights, reflecting the indispensability of the relational dimension of rights. It is a love which, whatever the strength of the right or duty asserted, might entertain self-restraint, or sacrifice,<sup>38</sup> as demonstrated by Paul. While robust in asserting his rights on some occasions (e.g. his legal rights as a Roman citizen; Acts 22:24-29), Paul nevertheless was at times prepared to forego rights for the sake of the Gospel and the building up of the church (1 Corinthians 9:19; 10:23). Rights, therefore, are not absolutes to be asserted in all situations; rather, the imperative for love requires a move beyond rights to consider how they should be exercised.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps the clearest expression of the modern system’s misplaced optimism, from a biblical perspective, is evident in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The

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<sup>35</sup> Dalacoura, *Islam, Liberalism and Human Rights*, 2003:58

<sup>36</sup> Zylstra, “The Bible, Justice and the State,” in van der Walt et al. 1995:280

<sup>37</sup> Marshall, “Justice and Rights,” in van der Walt et al., eds., *Confessing Christ in Doing Politics*, 1995: 490

<sup>38</sup> Solzhenitsyn, cited in Marshall 1995:484

<sup>39</sup> Rivers, “Beyond Rights,” *Jubilee Centre*, 1997: <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/document.php?id=18>

preamble to the Declaration calls for a new world order in which "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."<sup>40</sup> It is the clear biblical witness that Christ, rather than human recognition of inherent dignity, is the true foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world (e.g. John 8:36, Matthew 12:18; John 14:27). The redeeming sacrifice that has secured freedom, justice and peace also thereby affirms the dignity of all people. That sacrifice expressed Christ's love supremely; a love which is the exemplar for all inter-human relationships.

### **Review and discussion questions**

- a. How does Christ's call to his disciples for carrying the cross everyday provide an answer to the insufficiency of "the misplaced optimism evident in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" as explained in this section. Elaborate.
- b. What unique contributions do you find the work of Christ has provided to help practically fulfill the justice and equality mandate of the Old Testament?

### **Conclusion**

We have defended the position that the concept of human rights is fully supported by the bible and that advocating for human rights is part the Christian calling for the church and individual Christians. We have considered seven Christian doctrines and how they support human rights, and we have considered four common objections from Christians to the concept of human rights or to involvement in human rights advocacy, providing grounds for strong rebuttal of those objections.

If Christians are to be encouraged to become involved in defending their own rights and the rights of their neighbours, they must be equipped with the following:

1. A commitment to human rights and the mandate to advocate for rights;
2. A knowledge of human rights, their applicability, and mechanisms for defending, upholding or claiming rights;
3. The practical skills necessary to investigate and record human rights abuses, write petitions and appeals, etc.

This module has provided a basis for encouraging Christians to appreciate and value the concept of human rights, and to commit themselves to being involved in advocating for human rights. Other modules in this course address the imparting of knowledge and the transferring of skills, with a particular focus on a key area of human rights – freedom of religion or belief. Additional tools are available from a range of other sources.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Preamble to the UDHR: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Pages/Language.aspx?LangID=eng>

<sup>41</sup> There are many good resources available online that address these needs. See e.g. Tear Fund International Learning Zone (<http://tilz.tearfund.org>), the Viva Network ([www.viva.org](http://www.viva.org)) or the Global Human Rights Education Network: [www.hrea.org](http://www.hrea.org)



## **Case Study/Learning Activity**

### **Human Rights in Your Community**

As you look at the community around you, survey in detail to find out in what ways the laws and practices of your society may tend to corrupt the image of God and rob the dignity of individuals in each of the following groups:

- The community of believers
  - The weak and poor of society
  - Foreign dwellers and migrant workers
1. Based on your survey, develop a list of human rights for each of the groups above.
  2. Evaluate the rights specified in question 1 to see how compatible each is with biblical teaching.
  3. Define steps you would take to advocate for these rights in your ministry context.
  4. Identify challenges, and specify steps to overcome them.

## **Additional Reading**

*Evangelism and Social Responsibility: an Evangelical Commitment* (Lausanne Occasional Paper 21): Chapters 3 and 4 ("A Call to Social Responsibility" and "The Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility").

## Lesson Five Test

*Choose the best answer*

1. Concerns for the human rights of individuals can be seen in the
  - a. French Declaration of Rights
  - b. American Declaration of Independence
  - c. Law of Hammurabi
  - d. Books of the Pentateuch
  - e. All of the above
2. The core of the human rights ideals in the Bible are seen in God's
  - a. exclusive concern for the welfare of Israel
  - b. detailed stipulations of the ceremonial law
  - c. concern for the widows and fatherless
  - d. inspired prophecies about the Messiah
3. The Bible supports the dignity of humans in asserting that
  - a. mankind is made in the image of God
  - b. believers are equal with free will
  - c. governments enact God's full will
  - d. salvation brings honor to all people
  - e. all of the above
4. The call to live by Kingdom ethics can be summarized in the command to
  - a. live by the law of Moses
  - b. love God and neighbor
  - c. defend the promised land
  - d. honor father and mother

*Mark with True (T) or False (F), and correct the false statement.*

5. Human rights are those basic standards without which people cannot live in dignity
6. To advocate human rights is to demand that human dignity of your kin be respected
7. The social gospel is presented in this lesson as a way to protect individual rights
8. Sin and evil in the world can be overcome by strong government and fair legal system
9. Some believers avoid human rights advocacy thinking it originated in secularism

*Give open answers to the questions below.*

10. Good law intends to help safeguard the rights of individual humans and hence preserve their dignity. What perspective does Ezekiel 11:19-20, 36:26-31 bring to this discussion, and what resolution does the prophet envision.
11. How much is the preservation of one's own rights an individual matter, and to what extent is it a community responsibility? How would that differ between individualistic Western-like societies where government is functional, and a

patriarchal community where authority is kept within clan limits? Give examples from your own experience.

12. Someone has said: “Dignity is a relative term; it depends on the value system an individual or community holds. Therefore what may be claimed as rights by some could drastically compete with the rights of others”. Explain this quote, and give your opinion.
13. As son, the radiance of God’s glory and His exact representation (Hebrews 1:3), where was Jesus’ dignity while being tried and hanging on the cross? The scriptures describe him a servant despised and forsaken by God. What does this tell us about the source of our dignity, and the nature of our mandate in the world when called to carry the cross every day? Elaborate in your own words.
14. What are a few reasons why belief in Christ constitutes a strong incentive to some for human rights advocacy?
15. We are reminded in this lesson that sometimes protesting and challenging the status-quo as defined by current authorities can benefit others. Assess the truth of this with reference to a contemporary challenge in the Middle East (such as the tragic events in Syria since 2011, with their humanitarian consequences).
16. Give at least three examples from the life of Christ of how he engaged with human rights advocacy, during his ministry. How would that compare with our duty to do so in our present time?
17. In the extra reading of this lesson, social activity was presented as a *consequence*, a *bridge*, and *partner* of evangelism. Give examples from your personal and/or community experience that show how each of these aspects can be true in practice.
18. Do you agree with the affirmation of the *Lausanne Covenant* that “in the church's mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary”, and with the authors of the *Lausanne Occasional Paper 21* that “evangelism has a certain priority” over social activity? Explain your answer in a paragraph.

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