

Human Rights, Apologetics, and Persecution

By Glenn M. Penner.

The subject of human rights is one that evangelicals have tended to shy away from. To defend the rights of others seems, to some, to be somehow unspiritual. After all, it may be rightfully pointed out, Christians are called to give up their rights just as Christ did in His incarnation.¹ The ugliness of witnessing followers of Jesus Christ fight for their personal rights (especially with each other) is one that has brought disrepute upon the Body of Christ. Rather than saying “See how they love one another,” the watching world has more often been able to comment, with a smirk, “See how they fight one another.” This has led some Christians to conclude that we have no rights to defend.

I believe a more appropriate approach would be to affirm that often neglected distinction between private and public rights. Privately, Christians are not to take the law into their own hands² but this does not remove the right of the State to uphold the laws of the land.³ In the same way, Christians may choose to give up their rights, but this does not presuppose that the rights are not legitimate and that others can (and perhaps should) uphold them. Nor does this imply that Christians should not, at times, stand up for their own rights as citizens. The apostle Paul exemplified this when he felt free to either forgo his rights or to use them. On at least three occasions Luke records Paul exercising his rights as a Roman citizen as a defense for his religious beliefs.⁴ The advancement of God’s kingdom would seem to be the biblical criterion of whether to renounce or uphold one’s rights. Unfortunately, the criterion is more often the advancement of our own personal agendas.

There are times (probably more often than we are comfortable admitting) when the call to follow Christ and to conform to His image requires that we renounce the rights that we may rightfully possess. Giving up illegitimate rights can hardly be considered a sacrifice. Similarly, to refuse to uphold the rights of others simply because we have personally chosen to renounce them is unjust and a direct violation of scriptural commands to defend the weak and oppressed and to speak on their behalf.⁵

The basis of all biblical commands is the character of God, whose character we are to reflect as image-bearers. An even cursory examination of the scriptural record reveals a God who is particularly concerned with the minimal civil rights of people belonging to vulnerable groups. The Mosaic law surpassed other contemporary civil codes in its affirmation of fair and equitable treatment of all citizens regardless of their social status. In Exodus 22:21, for example, we find the Lord commanding Israel not to oppress the foreigner. It is significant that this admonition immediately follows the Lord’s instructions to execute those who worship other gods. While the Israelites were not to

¹ Philippians 2:3-11

² Matthew 5:38-42

³ Romans 13:4

⁴ Acts 16:37; 22:25-29; 25:10-11

⁵ Proverbs 29:7; 31:8-9; Micah 6:8; Matthew 25:31-46; Hebrews 13:3; et al.

worship foreign deities, they were not to oppress the foreigner himself. This implies permission for the foreigner to continue his or her religious practice in Israel. Only when the foreigner's religious practice involved such heinous customs as child sacrifice was this religious liberty to be restricted.⁶ God's people were to keep themselves separate from false religious systems of their day, yet without violating the rights of those whom they knew to be wrong.

The basis for a Christian view of human rights is largely based, however, not on a specific biblical proof text but on a biblical view of mankind. As a bearer of the image of God, however, marred by sin, individuals are worthy of respect and possessors of dignity. To disrespect the image bearer is to disrespect the one whose image is being represented.⁷ Exemplified by the Creator's willingness to allow false religious beliefs to continue unpunished for the present, Christians uphold the right for the individual or group to be wrong. Therein lies the difference between evangelism and proselytism. Religious coercion is a violation of an individual's God-given right to choose one's own belief system, even if it is incorrect, morally repugnant and inconsistent with the general and special revelation of God. So long as religious practice does not violate the rights of others, it should be not interfered with. This does not negate the importance of apologetics and evangelism. It does call us, however, to use methods that respect the rights of others to be wrong, if they persist in upholding their beliefs.

To that end, it should not come as a surprise to learn that countries that have historically been influenced by a strong Christian worldview (and Protestantism in particular) consistently maintain the highest levels of religious liberty for its citizens.⁸ Of course, such freedom has not always been consistently upheld. The brutal persecution of Anabaptists during the Reformation is only one tragic example of how Christians have failed to consistently practice a biblical view of religious liberty. Evangelicals continue to be persecuted in parts of Latin America in the name of Roman Catholicism, just as they do in Ethiopia in the name of Ethiopian Orthodoxy. Recent developments in Europe should cause Christians great concern, as western European states (e.g. Belgium, Austria, Germany, and France) have passed legislation restricting the activities and existence of new, non-orthodox religions or "sects." In their antipathy to these new faiths, evangelical minorities tend to get lumped together with groups that are genuinely dangerous. In eastern Europe, governments are increasingly restricting the activities and existence of any religious groups that challenges the hegemony of the historically dominant one.

Christians should be concerned when they hear of the persecution of non-orthodox groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Hare Krishna, or Scientologists because in many cases, evangelicals are also being misconstrued as being similar to these groups in the minds of the legislators and the general public. But whereas these non-orthodox groups seldom suffer persecution quietly without their co-religionists from North America, in particular, rising to their support and lobbying on their behalf, Christians, on

⁶ Leviticus 20:2

⁷ James 3:9

⁸ Paul Marshall, *Religious Freedom in the World Today* (Broadman & Holman, 2000): 20.

the other hand, in many parts of the world often suffer persecution in virtual obscurity and anonymity.

This is not because Christians are persecuted less than other religious groups. Rather, the opposite is true. In the last year, an estimated 165,000 Christians were put to death because of their identification with and witness for Jesus Christ.⁹ No other religious group can claim numbers anywhere near this amount. In 1998, 82% of those killed worldwide because of their religious convictions were Christians. The World Evangelical Fellowship estimates that 200,000,000 Christians worldwide live under the daily threat of imprisonment, torture, or execution because of their faith. An additional 400,000,000 live in societies with laws that specifically discriminate against Christians.

Persecution is often cited by non-orthodox religious groups such as the Bahai, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses as a sign of the truthfulness of their religion. If this was a valid argument (and I am not convinced that it is), Christianity would have no close competitors in this regard.

What is puzzling is the lack of concern by many North American evangelical Christians for their brothers and sisters around the world. While many reasons could be cited¹⁰, I am convinced that part of the cause is a direct result of a relative dearth of careful thinking concerning religious liberty and human rights in the evangelical community. We have tended to leave the field to our mainline church counterparts and condemned them (and the issue itself) when they mistakenly confuse religious tolerance with religious endorsement. With the spread of postmodernist thought in our society and the corresponding weakening of moral and objective truth in the minds of many, even among evangelicals, the role of apologetics and evangelism has increasingly been disparaged as inappropriate actions for Christians in a multicultural society such as Canada's. Evangelicals must begin to do the hard work of reclaiming a part of our legacy; the field of human rights.

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⁹ David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, "Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission:2001" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (Vol.25, No.1, January 2001):24

¹⁰ cf. Paul Marshall, *Their Blood Cries Out* (Word, 1997):149-209; Nina Shea, *In the Lion's Den* (Broadman & Holman, 1997):13-16.