

Declaration on Human Rights

We the Commission on Freedom, Justice, and Peace gathered for the 1980 session of the Baptist World Alliance in Toronto, Canada, July, 1980, being aware of the widespread violation of human rights and being convicted of our responsibility to apply the biblical mandates for justice, freedom, peace, and love, do hereby issue this statement on human rights.

Theological Foundation

Human rights are derived from God—from his nature, his creation, and his commands. Concern for human rights is at the heart of the Christian faith. Every major doctrine is related to human rights, beginning with the biblical revelation of God. Justice and mercy are used in the Bible to describe God's ways with human beings, but they are also set forth as the responsibility of human to human. Why? Because God, the sovereign Lord of all, commands it. The Bible declares, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic. 6:8) Human rights are rooted in the nature of God. God is just, merciful, and loving. He requires of humans also to be just, merciful, and loving because they are made in his image and thus are created to be like God in his moral nature.

The Bible presents certain basic truths about mankind which indicate that human rights are intrinsic in the nature of the world as created by God. Humanity has been created for a relationship with God, for social relationships in which human potentialities can be developed to the fullest, and for a harmonious relationship with nature and an enjoyment of her fruits. However, the rights of each individual to enjoyment of these relationships is inseparable from responsible participation in them.

Created by God as *spiritual beings*, persons have the right to worship God individually and corporately and to practice and propagate their faith according to the dictates of conscience. They have the responsibility to renounce all religious coercion and to allow others the freedom to worship, to practice and propagate their faith, or to profess no religious faith. The only authentic worship is that entered into freely.

As *moral beings*, God gives persons freedom of choice and responsibility for that choice. Persons have the right to respond freely to God and neighbors, and they have the responsibility to love God and neighbors.

As *psycho-physical beings*, persons have the right to life and the enjoyment of nature, including adequate food, shelter, clothing, and medical care as well as the right to be free from physical abuse through torture or slavery. They have the right to work. They also have the responsibility for working, if able, to provide these necessities for themselves and for others and for refraining from abusing and depriving others of the basic necessities of life.

As *social beings*, persons have the right to belong or not belong to social groupings, including familial, religious, economic, and political, and to express the identity and aspirations of such groups. They have responsibility to participate constructively in such groups and to refrain from

hindering the activities and expressions of other groups. Therefore, human rights are both individual and corporate.

Jesus Christ came to reveal not only the nature of God but also the true nature of humanity. Our standard for what it means to be fully human—and thus for understanding human rights and responsibilities—is Jesus Christ. Jesus’ life was dominated by self-giving love and was marked by a strong partiality for the poor and the powerless, for those whose rights are often denied. In defining his mission, Jesus declared, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised” (Luke 4:18)

At the heart of Jesus’ teaching was the command to love God and to love one’s neighbor as oneself (Luke 10:27). Biblically, love is pictured not as a mere emotion, but as goodwill in action; love calls for doing something about the plight of one’s neighbor. For a Christian to observe the violation of another’s rights and do nothing is contrary to God’s command (Jas. 4:17). The Bible reveals that all persons are made in “the likeness of God” (Jas. 3:9). The Scriptures declare that God “hath made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on all the faces of the earth” (Acts 17:26). Therefore, human rights are not for a few but for all.

Violations of human rights stem from humanity’s turning away from God which results in the turning of human beings against each other and against nature. Throughout the Bible God’s prophets strongly condemn the injustices and suffering which result from this. Nevertheless, they also proclaim God’s continued concern for humanity and promise the ultimate fulfillment of God’s original intention for the human race.

Practical Application

The theological foundations of the Christian faith and the direct teachings of the Bible indicate a number of specific human rights with implied responsibilities which ought to be of concern to persons everywhere and especially to those who follow Jesus Christ. Among these are the following:

- (1) The right to choose a religion freely and to maintain religious belief or unbelief without political advantage or disadvantage.
- (2) The right to meet together for worship and to share religious faith publicly with others; the government’s protection of these rights without discrimination among the faiths.
- (3) The right to remain single or to form families in which children are born and religious education is provided for those children.
- (4) The right to a healthy environment, including clean air and pure water, sanitary living quarters, and an earth which can support and nurture present and future generations.
- (5) The right to be employed and to receive a just return for one’s labor.
- (6) The right to the fruits of labor, including adequate food, clothing, shelter, and health care.
- (7) The right to participate in the political processes, to have a voice in the decision-making apparatus of government, and to be secure from the fear of governmental persecution.
- (8) The right to privacy.

- (9) The right to express convictions according to the dictates of conscience even when contrary to the prevailing norms of government or society.
- (10) The right to cultural identity.
- (11) The right to be free from violence against one's person, including slavery, torture, and inhuman or degrading forms of punishment.
- (12) The right to be free from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment.
- (13) The right to a just and open trial with an opportunity to confront accusers.
- (14) The right to equal protection under the law against discrimination on the grounds of age, sex, race, religion, class national origin, cultural background, marital status, economic condition, or handicap.
- (15) The right to a nationality, to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of one's nation state, and the right to travel from one's country and return.
- (16) The right to own property individually as well as in association with others.
- (17) The right to freedom of peaceful assembly.
- (18) The right to freedom of association and freedom from being compelled to belong to an association.
- (19) The right to leisure, rest, and recreation and to a reasonable limitation of working hours.
- (20) The right to an education.

Implementation

To declare human rights is not enough. To strive to promote and to defend human rights within churches and society at large is also our responsibility. Human rights are universally applicable, but in today's world they are universally violated. We confess our own involvement in the violation of human rights, and likewise our silence, often neither protesting nor interfering when we witness violations. We pledge ourselves to the following efforts to advance human rights in our world.

Evangelization is the key ingredient in advancing human rights. Because human rights are derived from God, all persons everywhere need to know him. Bringing persons to God through Jesus Christ opens to them both the possibility of understanding what is right and the power through the indwelling Spirit of God to do what is right.

Education is necessary ingredient in the protection of human rights. The Christian message concerning such subjects as racism, sexism, poverty, war, and corruption needs to be taught within churches and without. Christians everywhere need to understand that they are endowed with certain rights and also have definite responsibilities to defend and promote the rights of all persons.

Declaration to the world of our concern for human rights and of our determination to see those rights promoted is imperative. In the light of the world's condition, silence is sin. With prophetic courage we should point to violations of human rights and bring pressure to alter the attitudes and systems which produce them.

Action, therefore, is part of our responsibility. In light of the Bible's teachings concerning human rights, pastors should preach the word of God without fear or favor as it highlights human rights.

Churches should champion justice for the oppressed, provide food for the hungry, support changes in laws and systems which harm human beings, and do the things that make for peace. Christians should assume responsibility for ministering in Jesus' name to individuals whose human rights have been violated. Christians should endeavor to defend the rights of all persons no matter how far away or how weak they may be. Baptists everywhere ought to be involved not only in the proclamation of the gospel but also in the application of biblical truth in all areas of life.

Conclusion

Because we are being set free by the power of God through faith in Christ Jesus as Lord, we pledge to use our freedom responsibly to help free others. Individually as well as through our churches and institutions we promise to pray and work for the defense of human rights, to strive to avoid violating the rights of others, and to serve him from whom all human rights come, the only One who is Righteous, Just, and Merciful, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.