

What does the Bible say about rights?

By Paul Woolley: 797 words

Bible text:

"Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute." (Proverbs 31:8)

Key points:

- The language and theory of 'rights' is increasingly dominant today;
- The 'rights' conferred by the law on the Israelites reflected their inherent human dignity, based on their status as God's image bearers;
- The only rights which matter are those which emanate out of the person and nature of God himself;
- All rights belong to God.

The language and theory of 'rights' increasingly dominates our cultural and political landscape. I am writing this article at the end of June and the topic of rights is firmly on the news agenda. The alleged breach of human rights caused by the Government's anti-terror laws, the "right to be gay" and Guantanamo Bay are all in the news. It is tempting to think that this situation has ever been thus. But - like democracy - the concept of such rights is a relatively modern phenomenon. Both of these ideas were popularised by the Revolutions in France and America in the 18th century. Whereas in France, the Revolution was anti-clerical and atheistically secular (freedom *from* religion), in America the motivation was explicitly religious (freedom *of* religion). In 1787 Thomas Jefferson, U.S Minister to France at the time, wrote to James Madison and expressed his concern about "the omission of a bill of rights...providing clearly...for freedom of religion, freedom of the press, protection against standing armies, and restriction against monopolies." On 10 December 1948, in the aftermath of the Second World War, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It asserts that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights", and lists thirty articles, including the right to a nationality (Article 15) and paid holidays (Article 24).

Rights in the Old and New Testaments

But there are also references to rights in Scripture. The Old Testament law refers to the "rights of a daughter" (Exodus 21:9), "marital rights" (Exodus 21:10) and the "rights of a first born" (Deuteronomy 21:16). The Psalms and Wisdom literature have more to add on the subject. "Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed", declares Psalm 82:3. Proverbs 31:8 adds "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute." In the New Testament there are only four references to 'rights'. The apostle Paul speaks of his "rights as an apostle" (1 Corinthians 9). In Galatians Paul writes that "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons." (Galatians 4:5) Hebrews 12:16 refers to Esau, who "sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son."

So how are we to understand and apply this biblical perspective on rights in today's world?

Rights and responsibilities

Unlike many of today's 'rights', the Old Testament law was radically counter cultural. The idea of rights for a daughter, for example, was almost unheard of in the rest of the ancient Near East at the time. Underpinning the rights described in the Old Testament is a strong belief in the absolute power, authority and goodness of God. The law (including the rights conferred by it) represented part of the revelation of who God was. The 'rights' conferred by the law on the Israelites reflected their inherent human dignity, based on their status as God's image bearers. In biblical thought, the only rights which matter are those which emanate out of the person and nature of God himself. But linked to this status, there are not only rights; there were profound responsibilities. The people of God

in both the Old and New Testaments are responsible for revealing the glory of the true and living God to the rest of the world. The rights which the apostle Paul and the writer of Hebrews refers to are rights that emanate from their relationship with God and are intended to promote human flourishing.

God's rights

In the ultimate analysis, rights belong to God, the source of all beauty, goodness, truth and reality. God is not only the one who gives rights; God has a right to be glorified by his creatures. Consequently, secular human rights theory is illogical. Unless God exists, how can we speak of rights? Unless God exists, what can the possible basis be for human dignity?

Questions:

- Is there a place for a UN Declaration of human responsibilities?
- How would an emphasis on responsibilities, rather than rights, change the way we live?
- What rights does God have?

Further reading:

How Now Shall We Live? By Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey.

From the Bible

Micah 6:1-8