

APPENDIX I

HUMAN RIGHTS POSITION PAPER – A CHURCH PERSPECTIVE

INTRODUCTION

The area of Human Rights has become contested in Northern Ireland. Although agreements were made in this area at the time of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement difference and division across the community remains. The Churches have found themselves involved in this debate, seeking to bring a Christian perspective to the issues that arise but have always faced the challenge of a highly politicized debate which sometimes fail to become realistic and meaningful outside of the political accommodations that have to be reached. This position paper therefore seeks to draw together the thinking of PCI thereby enabling Presbyterians to engage in discussions about human rights with information to hand from the church.

Clearly, overzealous approaches to this subject can give it a “bad press”. Human rights can be (mis)represented in the media as little more than a charter for criminals, terrorists and anti-social behaviour. However events in some overseas countries show the dire consequences that may ensue for the vulnerable (including minority Christian communities) when human rights are disregarded, so the church cannot ignore the issue.

A CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO HUMAN RIGHTS

A concern for human rights is not exclusive to Christians, for they share it with people of other faiths or of no faith. Christians differ from secular people on the question of where our concern for human rights is grounded. Many secularists would simply assert, along with the American Declaration of Independence, that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” (An interesting use of the term “created”!) To Christians, attempts to find a purely secular basis for the worth which human beings have, and which accounts for their rights, are not convincing.

Christians share the belief that human rights are grounded in the inherent worth and dignity of every human being but locate the basis of that worth in the fact that each human being bears the image of God and is redemptively loved by God. John Stott (writing in 1984) said:

The origin of human rights is creation. Man has never “acquired” them. Nor has any government or other authority conferred them. Man has had them from the beginning. He received them with his life from the hand of his Maker. They are inherent in his creation.

(John Stott *Issues Facing Christians Today*, pp143-144).

The simple yet profound declaration of Genesis:

So God created humans to be like himself; he made men and women.

(Genesis 1:27 CEV)

- (i) means that all human beings enjoy, among other things,
- (ii) the right to life and the resources to sustain it, for life is a gift from God;
- (iii) a right to human dignity, i.e. the right to receive respect irrespective of age, gender, race or rank or any other way in which we define individual human beings;
- (iv) a responsibility to secure/protect/establish the rights of others, for God is love. Rights only exist in relationship with others, albeit coming into play most significantly when relationships break down. Christians found their belief in relationship within the Trinity believing that God has made us in the Trinitarian image, for mutual relationship. It is out of this relationship of mutuality that Christians are challenged to love God and our neighbour as ourselves;
- (v) the right to justice, for all have been created equal before God’s law.

Historically Christianity has been a major influence in developing the concept of human rights; it was within the Christian theological tradition that the category of human rights originated. The atheist Friedrich Nietzsche, intending a criticism, said, “...the poison of the doctrine of ‘equal rights for all’ - it was Christianity that spread it most fundamentally.”

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS INFORMING A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN RIGHTS

The Fall

The Fall, human disobedience before God, had lasting effects. The Creator’s good gifts can be spoiled by human sin and the area of human rights is no exception. The rights that God gave to all human beings equally can easily be corrupted and spoiled by the very things which a concern for human rights seeks to address, the protection of the weak, marginalised or excluded. When fed by an inflated sense of one’s own weakness, or the weakness of one’s group, talk of equality in rights can degenerate into arguing for “my rights” regardless of the rights of others. The rights of an individual or group are seldom absolute and must be balanced against the rights of other individuals or groups.

The language of “rights” is usually invoked when there is a breakdown in relationships. Conflict can arise between the rights of one individual or group and those of another, e.g. in the Northern Irish context, between organizations wanting to parade in a certain area and residents who object. There can also be a conflict between the rights of an individual and those of a corporate body, e.g. between the rights of an individual worker and the rights of the company that employs him or her. In such situations of competition there can be a tendency for one group to dominate another, so minorities need to be protected from the tyranny of the majority. All such conflicts over rights are a consequence of our fallenness.

Scripture

The Bible does not use the modern vocabulary of “human rights”, as it usually emphasizes the responsibilities of the powerful more than the rights of the weak, but concern for human rights is implicit in Scripture. Given the difference between the Old Testament era (when “church” and “state” were co-terminous and made laws for the whole community) and the New Testament era, when Christians were a small and powerless minority, it is understandable that, generally speaking, specific provisions for particular matters are found in the Old Testament and fundamental principles in the New.

Old Testament

The Pentateuch protected the weak and the vulnerable, e.g. “You shall not keep back a hired man’s wages till next morning. You shall not treat the deaf with contempt nor put an obstruction in the way of the blind.” (Leviticus 19: 13-14). It laid down laws about the right to life (e.g. the homicide laws in Numbers 35: 9ff), about property, (e.g. the land laws in Leviticus 25:25-34), and about “the stranger within your gates”. “You shall not oppress a stranger for you were strangers in Egypt” (Exodus 22:21). Concern for the poor is evident in e.g. Deuteronomy 15:11, “I command you to be open-handed towards your brothers and towards the poor and needy in your land” and in the arrangement for poor gleaners at harvest time. (Leviticus 19: 9-10). The right to a fair trial was recognised. “Hear the law cases and judge righteously between every man and his brother and the stranger; you shall not respect persons in judgment but you shall hear the small as well as the great; you shall not be afraid of the face of man” (Deuteronomy 1:17). The Hebrew prophets too wanted a fair legal system, e.g. “Let justice run down as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream” (Amos 5:24).

New Testament

In the New Testament Jesus taught his disciples that being citizens of the Kingdom of God required unworldly thought and action. “The kings of the pagans have power over their people ...but this is not the way it is with you” (Luke 22: 25, 26). Secular standards were reversed; instead of a self-righteous demanding of rights there was to be the giving of rights by the acceptance of responsibility for others and loving service to them. “Look out for one another’s interests, not just for your own” (Philippians 2:4). Old Testament provisions are sometimes repeated in the New, e.g. the command in Deuteronomy 15, 11 to be open-handed is echoed in I Timothy 6:17f “Command those who are rich in this present world... to be rich in good deeds and to be generous and willing to share.”

Duty to God

The primary motive for Christian concern for human rights is our duty to God. C S Lewis, commenting on such phrases as “What right have they...?” “You’ve no right to be here” “I know my rights” “By rights...” etc, observes that behind such phrases “...there is a tacit acknowledgement of some external standard or norm which can be a source of authority, protection or arbitration. Such a standard or norm has to be independent of the parties in the dispute for it to be worth appealing to. It has to ‘transcend’ them both.” (*Mere Christianity* Ch 1). Sometimes that authority may lie in civil law (e.g. on fair employment) but not always; many people using the language of “rights” might find it difficult to say precisely where they find that higher authority. Christians, however, should be in no doubt. “This transcendent norm is God Himself – his righteousness and justice” (John Stott).

The Bible indicates that our responsibility for human rights derives primarily from our responsibility to God. Though he might dispute it, Cain was answerable to God for his brother. Relevant Old Testament injunctions are often reinforced by such statements as “I [the Lord] command you...” (e.g. Deuteronomy 8:11; 10:13; 13:18; 24:18, 22; etc.) The Book of Proverbs observes “He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker” (Ch 14:31). Micah, in a much-quoted verse, indicates that it is the Lord who requires us “to do justly” etc (Ch 6:8). Nehemiah 5 takes up the cause of impoverished farmers who were being forced to mortgage their land and eventually to sell their dependents as pledges to pay off excessive interest to the rich. His appeal to their creditors goes directly to their obligation to God. He asks “Should you not walk in the fear of our God?” (Ch 5:9).

In modern society many groups are quick to fight for their own needs (though not all “needs” are necessarily “rights”) but the primary Christian motive is not self-interest. Of course there are times when the church should speak up for freedom of thought, conscience and belief; individuals, parents and religious institutions have a right to be distinct, and to promote and protect values consistent with their religious convictions. They should not be obliged by State legislation to promote views contrary to their deeply held religious beliefs (e.g. the traditional Christian view of marriage). The church is also justified in defending its own interests in areas like the employment of staff, claiming the right to employ only those whom it considers morally and spiritually suitable for church work, whatever the secular authorities might say. However, the church’s the main motive for debating human rights is not self-interest but duty to God.

Civil Law

Given that human relationships do break down, human beings need to be protected from one another, whether as individuals or as corporate groups, and if fundamental human rights are to be enforced, those rights need to be justifiable. However Civil Law, though necessary, has its limitations, for laws may not make people good. Human Rights conventions, charters and legislation cannot achieve everything and risk spawning endless fractious litigation. “Judicial decrees may not change the heart but they can restrain the heartless” (Dr Martin Luther King). Attitudes need to change and that is a message that the Christian gospel preaches as it calls its hearers to a change of heart.

Responsibility

In line with Bible teaching modern Christians stress responsibilities as well as rights.

“We are very suspicious of reasoning which ...detaches rights from responsibilities or elevates rights above responsibilities...In Christian thinking it is sometimes better not to insist on the exercise of a perceived right in the

interests of the overall wellbeing of a society...To voluntarily set aside one's rights is not the same as having them denied."

(PCI Church and Government submission to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 2001).

Paul showed judgment in exercising the different rights he had. He claimed his legal rights as a Roman citizen in relation to corporal punishment (Acts 22:25) and in his appeal to Caesar (Acts 25:11), yet chose a "tent-making ministry" rather than living off the Christian community as he was entitled to do (Acts 20: 33-34).

APPLICATION OF CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES

The foregoing has practical applications in at least three areas.

In the Church

Christian communities should strive to exhibit within their own ranks that alternative society which bears the marks of the Kingdom of God. The church will thus be a sign to the world of true human existence under the authority of Christ.

"We have to take more seriously Christ's intention that the Christian community should set an example to other communities. ... The life of the local church ... is meant to be a sign of God's rule. The church should be the one community in the world in which human dignity and equality are invariably recognised and human responsibility for each other accepted; the rights of others are sought and never violated, while our own are often renounced; there is no partiality, favouritism or discrimination; the poor and the weak are defended, and human beings are free to be human as God made us and meant us to be."

(John Stott)

In wider society

Christians have responsibilities towards the wider community, sharing with secularists a genuine concern for the welfare of society. The church has the right and the duty to care about that and speak about it. The Christian gospel, with its message of compassion, requires sensitivity to victims and excluded groups, especially if others are not paying much attention to them. The weak and the vulnerable need protection and the church should say so, even if it is an unpopular cause. The struggle for human rights has given the church some of its modern martyrs, e g Janani Luwum (Anglican archbishop in Idi Amin's Uganda), Oscar Romero (Roman Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador at a time of ruthless government repression) or Dr Martin Luther King (Baptist minister in the U S A at a time when the Afro-American community was being treated unfairly). Such Christian leaders highlighted exclusion, injustice and intolerance of difference as being among the primary causes of breaches of human rights and of conflicts between individuals and communities, and they took their stand accordingly.

For dealing with governments

Churches have a responsibility under God to address the powers that be. Churches have supported Bills of Rights in such countries as the USA, Canada, the Irish Republic, South Africa and the United Kingdom. No human government is perfect, and the Reformed tradition in particular makes provision for the right, even the duty, to resist when human governments violate the purposes for which they were appointed. If necessary the church must be willing to become an offence to the powers that be in its support of the deprived and vulnerable.

SUMMARY

John Stott provides a useful summary of the Christian position.

Here then is a Christian perspective on human rights. First, we affirm human dignity. Because human beings are created in God's image to know him, serve one another and be stewards of the earth, therefore they must be respected. Secondly, we affirm human equality. Because human beings have all been made in the same image by the same Creator, therefore we must...behave without partiality to all. Thirdly we affirm human responsibility because we have to accept that other people's rights are our responsibility. We are our brother's keeper because God has put us in the same human family and so made us related to, and responsible for, one another. The law and the prophets, Jesus and his apostles, all lay on us a particular duty to serve the poor and defend the powerless. As God has laid it upon us to love and serve our neighbour, we must fight for his rights, while being ready to renounce our own in order to do so.

(Issues Facing Christians Today, pp. 150-151).