

The Disciple & Human Rights

Does the Bible encourage protest?

AFTER many centuries of development, the concept of "Human Rights" is firmly embedded in the culture and ethos of those countries of the world that consider themselves to be democratic. Human Rights are commonly understood as the "inalienable fundamental rights to which a person is inherently entitled simply because she or he is a human being". Such rights are not acknowledged in every country, but where they are, people expect to benefit from them as a matter of course. When the rights are violated, ignored, withheld or removed, it is thought right to protest (another "right") with the marches, demonstrations, picketing and sit-ins which are now so familiar a feature of twenty-first century life. There are campaigns, for example, against world poverty, freedom marches, protests against tyranny, and demonstrations to draw attention to rising world food prices. There are also protests relating to more personal and domestic issues, such as health care, unemployment, homelessness, hardship and injustice. All this activity is geared to gaining or restoring the entitlements that people feel have been denied. The question that we wish to examine is whether it is appropriate for a disciple of Christ to demand rights, to join protest marches, to sign petitions, and so on.

The aim of Human Rights is to create a better world – peaceful, fair, and equal, without poverty, famine, war, oppression or endemic plague. Ignoring the fact that it is God's intention to bring about these conditions in His kingdom in His own time, the world would expect those claiming the name of Christ to be eager to join in such a crusade. Surely disciples should be involved enough to campaign for the good of their neighbour who is distressed and deprived of his rights? After all, many religious communities commit themselves to this "social gospel". Surely there is no better way of demonstrating belief in Christ's gospel than by taking part in protest activities to improve the lot of their fellow man?

Disciples of Christ may well vex their own conscience about the evils and injustices that surround them in society. They may well feel the pressure from their peers, work-fellows or social contacts, or from the general ethos put forward by statesmen and religious leaders. Edmund Burke expressed it in this way: "The only thing necessary for evil to flourish is for good men to do nothing." Archbishop Desmond Tutu is more condemnatory: "If you are neutral on situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." To which counsel then should the disciple listen in guiding him out of his dilemma? The answer is, to the Bible – to the words and example of the Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles, of course!

The "four freedoms"

First, however, let us briefly review the history of Human Rights and note the wide scope of everyday life which they affect. The original concerns of this movement had a universality of character. For example, the 1776 Constitution of the United States of America is applicable to all its people: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." [1] Extending this considerably, President Franklin D. Roosevelt advanced to the US Congress in 1941 the ideal of "Four Freedoms" (freedom of speech and expression; freedom of individual worship; freedom from want and freedom from fear).

In 1948 the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in turn it is now part of the International Bill of Human Rights, international law which includes covenants on

Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The whole spectrum of life is now encompassed. It reaches into the home (family life, health and protection of children), the school (education and development) and the workplace (the right to work and an adequate standard of living, with sufficient food, clothing and housing).

Protest movements, riots and strikes

Because there are so many different rights, the causes of protest have proliferated, for the world around is marred by many gross social and political evils. The number of protesters has correspondingly multiplied. Sometimes there are recognised long-standing organisations. The Peace movement has the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament; environmentalists have Greenpeace and the Friends of the Earth; many Trade Union bodies contend for their members' rights. There are also numbers of smaller and less formal groups favouring various causes. All have the same objective to exert leverage on governments, corporations, and others wielding power for the purpose of advantage to their cause.

It should be noted that protest is always at the expense of, or detriment to, other members of the community, bystanders often not party to the root issue being contended. The disciple should consider that protests and demonstrations at the very least inconvenience and impede the public going about its business. Even though the organisers' intentions may be entirely peaceful, demonstrations can be infiltrated by agitators, often hastily assembled by social networking pages on the internet, with another agenda. The visible result is frequently violence, lawlessness, property damage, physical injury and threat to life.

An iconic and unforgettable image from the riots in England in August 2011 is that of a young woman leaping from a first floor window into the arms of rescuers, the whole scene being silhouetted against the raging flames threatening her life. These riots stemmed from an impromptu demonstration against police shooting of what they believed was an armed criminal, but rapidly extended to looting and arson in London, Birmingham, Manchester and other cities.

Trade Union strikes have the potential for injurious consequences. Whilst at one end of the scale strikes may cause simple inconvenience and frustration to some or all of the public, at the other end lies the misery caused for example to the old and poor when power workers go on strike in the winter, or to those needing medical treatment when health workers withdraw their services, or to the community as a whole when petrol tanker drivers threaten to bring the food and services distribution network of the whole country to a halt through lack of fuel.

Some protesters openly advocate 'civil disobedience', i.e., breaking the law by their behaviour. Other elements go further and break into premises, either to occupy them or to do damage. Extremists will threaten to do harm to the personnel of biological laboratories or those who support them in any way (even employees of the insurers of one laboratory were threatened at their homes).

The disciple can have no part of this. He will recognise that the fruits of public protest are diametrically opposite to the fruit of the Spirit which those seeking God's kingdom are to cultivate: love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22,23). Participation in public protest will entangle the disciple in worldly ways and matters and lead him away from his Master, whose teaching and example on this issue are clear.

What did Jesus say? What did Jesus do?

Was Jesus an agitator? Was he a revolutionary? Did he form a group bent on bringing about political or social change by pressurizing others? Did he seek to enforce his standards (albeit the best standards) on those who did not want to follow him? Patently (from scripture), no. In Jesus' time, Judaea was under military occupation. The iron rule of pagan Rome was oppressive, unjust, corrupt and frequently brutal. The torture of crucifixion attests to this, as does the massacre of the Galileans described in Luke 13:1,2.

What did Jesus do about these things? As the Son of God in God's land, what steps did he urge against the overlordship of the Romans? Absolutely none! There are no words of resentment, no threats, no instruction to his disciples that they must resist the Roman rule or seek to get rid of it. The silence is remarkable. On the contrary, on the only occasion on which he was confronted by the Roman power face to face, Jesus made it unequivocally clear that he and his followers were not a political, religious or social party opposing the Romans:

“My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now my kingdom is not from here.” (John 18:36)

“Render to Caesar ... and to God ...”

Roman taxes were iniquitous but, when questioned whether it was lawful to pay them, the Lord reminded the questioners (with perhaps the implication that they had overlooked this) that God's legitimate claim on His subjects' devotion also should be honoured. He was concerned, not to speak out against Roman taxes but for his hearers to get their spiritual priorities right:

“Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.” (Luke 20:25)

The disciple is expected to live according to his Heavenly Father's principles. He is told not to resist the evils unjustly imposed upon him. Another humiliation for the Jew in the Roman world was the Roman soldier's right to compel a man to carry the soldier's pack for a mile. Jesus' instruction to “go the second mile” would have been very unpopular among the Jews – and wholly contrary to any incitement to protest:

“And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.” (Matthew 5:41,42)

Jesus goes on to explain why this unique way of life must be followed; the disciple had to appreciate the “perfection” of the Father (and His Son):

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” (Matthew 5:43-45,48)

What did the apostles say and do?

Not unexpectedly, once their Master had ascended to heaven, the apostles continued to apply the teaching of Christ.

“Human Rights”, as we know them, were scarcely acknowledged in the time of Jesus and his apostles. For slaves, they were non-existent. Slavery was widespread throughout the Roman

Empire. Many of the disciples were slaves, and some were masters who owned slaves. Slaves were not told to agitate for their freedom, whether or not their masters were good. Believing masters were not told to release their slaves. Nor were those who were neither masters nor slaves told to urge the abolition of slavery. Instead, the commands of the apostles, time after time in the letters of the New Testament, were like the commands of the Lord himself: be exemplary slaves and be compassionate masters ó ðin sincerity of heart, as to Christö (Paulö's teaching in Ephesians 6:5-9; see also 1 Corinthians 7:22; Colossians 3:22, 4:1; 1 Timothy 6:1,2).

The Apostle Peter counsels a submissive and obedient attitude to those in authority:

öTherefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lordö's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evil-doers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men ó as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God.ö (1 Peter 2:13-16)

Of course, as öbondservants of Godö, where there is a conflict of principle, the disciple öought to obey God rather than menö (Acts 5:29) ó but this is no licence for the kind of civil disobedience practised by some in the course of their protest.

Should a disciple protest at all?

Even those who accept New Testament teaching that the disciple must not resort to violence may wonder whether there can be objection to the signing of a petition, so easy now in the age of the internet and certainly not disruptive of the rights of others, or joining in a passive demonstration. From the counsel of scripture, however, we cannot escape the conclusion that the same teaching of Jesus and his apostles which commands abstinence from violence also teaches that we can have no part in protest against authority. It is part of the same logic of our faith. Protest ó whether for peace or in any other cause ó is an act of assertiveness: it is incompatible with discipleship. However peaceable oneö's protest might be, however passive the demonstration, participation in public protest activities is a first step on the slippery slope of political involvement and the use of worldly methods of lobbying the authorities. Those who petition in this manner are claiming the right to make a demand of worldly authority; the disciple, on the other hand, discounts his earthly citizenship (Philippians 3:20) and makes no claim upon those who govern him; even less does he demand something that those in authority have decided not to allow. Although the disciple, in common with others, receives the benefits which the state confers and is grateful for these, he neither expects nor demands them.

God is in control

We might have assumed that the only way in which things can be put right is by political or social means, or even by believing that good morals will finally conquer the bad. But such is not Bible teaching. There is a much more far-reaching principle revealed in the pages of scripture. Despite appearances, God is in control and is active in the affairs of men and nations. Here is the plain teaching of the Bible:

öBlessed be the name of God forever and ever, for wisdom and might are his. And he changes the times and the seasons; he removes kings and raises up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding.ö (Daniel 2:20,21)

“The Most High rules in the kingdom of men, gives it to whomever he will, and sets over it the lowest of men.” (Daniel 4:17)

The governments and rulers of men are appointed by God, whether these prove to be good or bad. God is working out His righteous and ultimate purpose using the materials to hand among sinful men. Nothing is beyond or out of His control. It might be objected that this is Old Testament teaching and is purely Jewish and altogether outmoded. It is certainly Old Testament teaching but it is repeated even more emphatically in the New:

“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.” (Romans 13:1,2)

These words were written to believers in the city of Rome in a pagan empire. The Christian was not to seek to change the government. Protest, agitation and subversion were out of the question. To resist the government is to resist God’s appointment. Let it be noted that it is not a question of whether the government is good or bad. Because God is in control, we should not resist His ordinance. This is even more telling when we remember that it is almost certain that the Apostle Paul was executed by the Roman emperor Nero. He lived and died believing that human governments are in God’s hand. This is the only note of hope in our violent and perplexed world. If God is not in control, then man is: if man is in control there is no hope. Even so, we are entitled to ask a further question:

When will God put things right?

There is an overall plan behind God’s control of nations. Despite their evil and through it, God will so fashion the world to make it plainly known that man is helpless and hopeless. Man expects to use the Human Rights code he has invented to solve his problems by his own efforts. God says that man never can and never will; his most sincere and most agonising attempts are doomed to failure. As the Lord Jesus Christ said in another connection, “Without me you can do nothing”.

God has promised that He will send Jesus Christ again and that Christ will put the world right when he reigns as King in Jerusalem:

“And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever.” (Daniel 2:44)

“[God] has appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:31)

“Yes, all kings shall fall down before him; all nations shall serve him. For he will deliver the needy when he cries, the poor also, and him who has no helper. He will spare the poor and needy, and will save the souls of the needy. And men shall be blessed in him; all nations shall call Him blessed.” (Psalms 72:11-13,17)

“At that time Jerusalem shall be called The Throne of the LORD, and all the nations shall be gathered to it, to the name of the LORD, to Jerusalem.” (Jeremiah 3:17)

These verses, and there are hundreds more in scripture, make it plain that God will send Jesus Christ to earth to reign as King and to rid the world of its evils. This is clearly what the Lord Jesus

Christ had in mind when he taught his disciples to pray: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). But how far away is this time of blessing?

Signs of the times

The Bible gives many signs by which faithful believers would be encouraged and would know that the end of the present age was drawing near. It is not our purpose here to deal with these in detail, but the following are the more important signs. Mankind would become self-centred and materialistic; home and family life would be disrupted; arrogance and violence would prevail; pleasure-seeking would be a way of life (see 2 Timothy 3:1-5). There would be distress among nations; mankind would be afraid of world events; Jerusalem would once again be in Jewish hands (see Luke 21:24-26). The Jews would return to Israel (see Jeremiah 30:3; 31:10; Ezekiel 37:21). These signs would herald the return of Jesus (Luke 21:27,28 and Jeremiah 33:14-16).

Other signs given in scripture include famines, pestilences and earthquakes. Above all we learn that men and women would have become wicked and godless. Whilst some of these circumstances have occurred at one time or another in world history, never before have all of them come together. We are therefore confident that we are now in that period of time which will see the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in power and glory. In the light of this knowledge we ought to be preparing for the great day of Christ's return.

The disciple's first call is to faith. He must believe that what God has promised He is able to perform (Romans 4:21). God's guarantees lie in the unfailing truth of His word; the birth, life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ; and the evidence of countless fulfilled prophecies. The true disciple will therefore believe what Jesus taught, namely, that he will return to earth (Matthew 16:27) and be King on earth (25:31). The disciple will do what his Master asks him to do. He will confess that he believes the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 8:12), and be baptized by immersion in water as Jesus commanded him (John 3:22; Mark 16:16).

Citizens of a heavenly kingdom

Because he believes these things and knows that God rules in the kingdoms of men, the true disciple will not rely on the promulgation of "Human Rights", nor engage in politics, protest or war to bring about the better world, but humbly and in faith follow his Master in accepting what God has ordained and in countering evil by goodness and obedience to the way of life lived by the Lord himself. He will not protest "yet he will proclaim his faith. He will not sign petitions "yet he will daily petition his Father in prayer. He will not join the marchers "yet he will conduct a lifelong campaign on behalf of his Lord:

"Always be ready to give a defence to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear." (1 Peter 3:15)

His obedience will make itself known in his attitude toward the state. He will "render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Matthew 22:21); he will pay "taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honour to whom honour" (Romans 13:7); and he will be "subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men" (Titus 3:1,2). The disciple is primarily a citizen of the coming kingdom of God (Philippians 3:20). He knows and believes that there is no solution to the world's problems other than the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. He seeks to live according to the laws of the coming kingdom of God; the disciple is an outpost of the coming

kingdom and therefore a ðstranger and pilgrimö in his own country (Hebrews 11:13 and 1 Peter 2:11,12). These are principles of the highest order. And they are realistic since they acknowledge the inability of man to govern himself and they confess confidence in the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, the appointed Prince of Peace.

Man is powerless to change the world; even disciples of Christ, who have been taught the will of God, must not presume to change the present order. When Jesus comes, however, he will have this authority, granted to him by his Father: ðAll authority has been given to me in heaven and on earthö (Matthew 28:18).

The final question

There can be but one question: Are we prepared to believe these things? The call of Christ demands a complete reappraisal of our life ó not just part of it, but the whole of it. We must surrender our so-called Human Rights and submit to the right of God in seeking us to serve Him. He is the Lord of heaven and earth, our Maker. His purpose and will are sovereign. We can no more save ourselves than the world can govern itself in peace. God does not blame us for this inability. He asks for a recognition of it and a faithful acceptance of the divine remedy, salvation in Jesus Christ. The death of Jesus was for our redemption and was a token that man without God is lost. The only way to everlasting life is by faith: faith in God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The way of life described in these pages is one of deep contentment and certainty. No longer need we run the rat-race, or seek by assertion and protest to get the world put right our way. If we cannot unaided put ourselves right, how then can we manage the world?

We have seen that discipleship is the only life with a future. Everlasting life in God's gracious kingdom here on earth is promised to all who believe that Christ is the appointed Saviour and the coming King. Without doubt he is coming back. We should prepare to meet him joyfully.

By Charles Pople

[1] In passing, we remark that God has not given anyone demandable rights of any sort.

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