

2008 LEADERSHIP SERIES

*Universal Foundations
for Human Rights:
A Dialogue in Genesis*



CHRISTIAN EMBASSY

1. DIGNITY
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Universal Foundations for Human Rights: A Dialogue in Genesis

The Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations declares its determination “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small.” Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights elaborates on this statement of faith, saying “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

Such documents are not expected to justify their assumptions, but these two statements raise several questions: “What gives a human being dignity and worth?” “How does human birth produce freedom and equality in dignity and rights?” “Who or what endows a person with reason and conscience?” “What is the basis of ‘brotherhood?’”

If, as some say, the United Nations is the moral conscience of the world, then the UDHR states the moral foundations on which the UN is built. On the occasion of the 60th anniversary, Christian Embassy is initiating a dialogue on the universal foundations of this exceptional document. While the UDHR is the first of its kind to define *universal* and *inalienable* human rights, it is not original. Most of its principles can be found in the book of Genesis. Each of the religions of the book—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—fundamentally agree on the Genesis account of God as creator of the world and humanity. It is in the first few chapters of Genesis that we will find primary source material to understand that the Creator of the Universe is the source of truly universal human rights.

First, Genesis 1:1 repudiates the principal false philosophies, many of which are a hindrance to human rights.

“In the beginning *God*” –denies Atheism with its doctrine of *no* God.

“In the beginning *God*” –denies Polytheism with its doctrine of *many* Gods.

“In the beginning God *created*” –denies Fatalism with its doctrine of *chance*.

“In the beginning God *created*” –denies Evolution with its doctrine of infinite *becoming*.

“God created *heaven and earth*” –denies Pantheism which makes God and the universe identical.

“God created *heaven and earth*” –denies Materialism which asserts the eternity of matter.

[from *Explore the Book*, by J. Sidlow Baxter]

Genesis 1:27, on the other hand, affirms humanity’s dignity and worth as a consequence of being created in the image of God. How is it that human beings have *any* rights? The origin of human rights is in creation. They have been bestowed (endowed) on humanity by their Creator. John Stott* says, “Human rights are the rights of human beings, and the nature of human rights depends on the nature of the human beings, whose rights they are.” Human dignity, he says, depends on our divine purpose which consists of three unique relationships established in creation: our relationship to God, our relationship to one another, and our relationship with the earth.

*[from *Involvement: Being a Responsible Christian in a Non-Christian Society*, by John Stott]

Consider the following questions as they relate to the foundations for human dignity and worth.

Please read Genesis 1:26-28

1. **Our relationship to God.** Genesis 1:27 states: “*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him.*” What does it mean to be made “in the image” of someone or something? How is the image similar to or different from the original? What are the implications of being created in the image of God? What does this say about *worship*?
2. **Our relationship to one another.** Genesis 1:27 continues: “*Male and female he created them.*” What are the implications? What does this say about *fellowship*?
3. **Our relationship with the earth.** Genesis 1:28 concludes: “*So God blessed them and said to them...‘fill the earth and subdue it.’*” What are the implications? What does this say about *stewardship*?
4. What do the following verses suggest about a person’s **inherent dignity and worth**? What does this imply about your human responsibility regarding the human rights of others?

Psalm 139:13-18

1 John 4:9-14

Matthew 7:12

“There can be no Rights of Man except on the basis of faith in God. But if God is real, and all men are his sons, that is the true worth of every one of them. My worth is what I am worth to God; and that is a marvelous great deal, for Christ died for me. Thus, incidentally what gives to each of us his highest worth gives the same worth to everyone; in all that matters most we are all equal.”

[William Temple, *Citizen and Churchman*]