

## 2008 LEADERSHIP SERIES

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



CHRISTIAN EMBASSY

**2. EQUALITY**  
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Dr. Michael Leary

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

‘Human rights’ have not always meant ‘equal rights.’ It is a tragedy, for example, that in a male dominated world gender discrimination needs special attention. The Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations speaks clearly and quickly to this issue by affirming its “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.” The Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights concurs with the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.” Article 1 adds: “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights,” and consequently “should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

These statements entreat us to ask, “Are equal rights really inherent and achieved by birth?” “Are the rights of men and women truly equivalent?” We will investigate the Biblical foundation of universal equal rights of men and women as a paradigm that answers the fallacy of discrimination on the basis of other distinctions, including race, religion, nationality or class.

The Bible speaks clearly about the equality of men and women. Genesis 1:27 says, “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” Genesis 2:7-25 elaborates on this with details about Adam being created before Eve. For an unknown period of time, Adam was alone on earth. And even though God concluded many times that His creation was “*good*,” He was emphatically negative about a noticeable deficiency in all that he made: “it is *not good* that man should be alone.” As Henri Blocher put it, “The world was suffering from an absence: the absence of woman.”

It was at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> day in Genesis 1—only *after* Eve was created—that God said of all that He had created, “It is *very good*.” Matthew Henry made the observation that “the woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.”

Being equal does not mean that we are identical. A comprehensive view of equality allows for our complementarity and differentiation, both *within* gender and especially *between* the genders. This has special significance when we address the topic of marriage in the fourth session.

Unfortunately, many women are treated very differently today and their rights are trampled by governments, institutions, and individuals. While our tendency is to address the unethical nature of human rights violations, the Bible takes a different approach. “Its emphasis is that no powerful individual may impose his will on the community, and that no community may violate the rights of an individual or minority. The weak and vulnerable were carefully protected by the Mosaic law. Far from exploiting them, God’s people were to be the voice of the voiceless and the champion of the powerless, including their enemies” (Stott, *Involvement Vol. I*).

As you read Genesis 1:26-28, you will see that from the beginning, ‘man’ was ‘male *and* female,’ and men and women were equal beneficiaries of the *imago Dei* and they shared the *earthly rule* with equal responsibility. The fundamental and universal equality of the sexes is affirmed.

It is sadly true that adherents of many religions, including those in the Christian church, have been historically identified with gender discrimination. Is this a problem that is inherent in religion or culture? What does the Bible say that provides a foundation for equal human rights as a birth-right of every human being? Carefully consider each of the following before you draw your conclusion.

1. **Gender equality in the eyes of God.** Read Genesis 1:26-28. Who was created in the image of God? What did God say was their divine purposes? What distinctions does God make in the purposes of men and women?
2. **Gender equality in the eyes of man.** Read Genesis 2:18-24. In what ways does Adam express that men and women are equals?
3. **The origin of gender discrimination.** Read Genesis 3:16 in its context. In what ways did the Fall of Adam and Eve distort gender equality as it existed in the original creation?
4. **The restoration of gender equality.** Read Romans 5:8 and Galatians 3:26-28. What is the unique contribution of Christian faith and truth to the equal rights of men and women?
5. **Our responsibility to address gender discrimination.** Read Philippians 2:1-5 and Romans 12:16-21. Neither of these passages speaks directly to gender discrimination, but both address the principles that are relevant to the subject. How should we treat someone of the opposite gender? How should we respond when our rights are violated?

“We have equal rights because we have the same Creator. Both the dignity and the equality of human beings are traced in Scripture to our creation. This principle should be even more obvious to the New Testament community, since we have the same Saviour also.”

[John Stott, *Involvement: Being a Responsible Christian in a Non-Christian Society*, p. 200]

***"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right."***

(Acts 10:34-35 TNIV)