

2008 LEADERSHIP SERIES

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



CHRISTIAN EMBASSY

8. REFORMATION

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Universal Foundations for Human Rights: A Dialogue in Genesis

The official slogan for the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is “Dignity and Justice for All.” This worthy and optimistic objective is not, however, self fulfilling. Nor will this goal be accomplished by the oppressed demanding their inherent rights. The protection, promotion and enhancement of human rights are the responsibilities of those who are in a position to implement change. The UDHR concurs in the final statements that “Everyone has duties to the community...” (Article 29).

What is the relationship between rights and responsibilities? In this Leadership Series we have already seen a strong biblical apologetic for many of the articles of the UDHR, but there is another perspective to consider. John Stott observes, “The Bible says much about defending other people’s rights, but little about defending our own. On the contrary, when it addresses us, it emphasizes our responsibilities, not our rights.” The Bible supports the UDHR where “R” stands for both “Rights” and “Responsibilities.” It gives a foundation, then calls us to renounce our own rights to protect, promote and enhance the rights of others.

Today we address the topic of “reformation,” not the alteration of the UDHR but the transformation of society. Throughout history there have been those exceptional leaders who have, it seems, been chosen by God for the good of humanity. They have given their lives to help the helpless, and defend the defenseless. Women like Mother Theresa. Men like William Wilberforce. And they follow a long list of reformers.

We see this commitment to reformation in the life of Noah. He lived in a *culture of corruption* that had degenerated to the point that it was said of humanity: “Every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.... But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. [He] was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God” (Genesis 6:5, 8, 9). Furthermore, he had a *destiny*. When God told him to build an ark to rescue the human race and every living creature from the impending flood, “Noah did everything just as God commanded him” (6:22) a task that took 120 years. God gives second chances and He often uses dedicated reformers to implement them.

We see this commitment in William Wilberforce. He lived in a *society of slavery* that had degenerated to the point that a person was treated as a possession, a mere economic commodity. When Wilberforce entered the parliament at the young age of 21, he stated that his own interests were his only interests. A radical transformation occurred in his life 4 years later when he became a follower of Jesus in 1785. Within a few months, John Newton, author of *Amazing Grace*, was persuading the young MP not to abandon parliament, but rather to combine the life of a Christian with the life of a politician. He went through a personal transformation that inspired him 2 years later to write the following words: “God almighty has set before me two great objects: the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners [changing the moral fabric of his culture].” Like Noah, he had a *God-given destiny*. He spent the rest of his life, 46 years, dedicated to securing the human rights of slaves. He died in 1833, just 3 days after being assured of the passage of the bill which a few months later abolished slavery throughout the British Empire.

We see this commitment supremely throughout the life of Jesus. Stott summarized it well: “Throughout his life he was a victim of abuses of human rights. He became a refugee baby in Egypt, a prophet without honour in his own country, and the Messiah rejected by the religious establishment of his own people to whom he had come. He became a prisoner of conscience, refusing to compromise in order to secure his release. He was falsely accused, unjustly condemned, brutally tortured, and finally crucified. And throughout his ordeal he declined to defend or demand his rights, in order that by his self-sacrifice he might serve ours.”

These three examples have a common theme. Each answered God’s call. Their dedication gave the world a second chance and transformed their society. As Newton advised Wilberforce, “You are not only a representative for Yorkshire, you have the far greater honour of being a representative for the Lord in a place where many know Him not.” Love God. Embrace your destiny. Change the world.

Our discussion will focus on Noah as a man of destiny with a mission from God. These same questions could be applied to other great leaders in history from whom we have much to learn.

1. **Think about it:** What kind of person would stand up for a great good in the face of incredible challenges? Who in your lifetime or in history has set this kind of example?
2. **Moral Climate:** Read Genesis 6:5-7 and 11-12. Describe the state of humanity at the time of Noah.
3. **Personal Destiny:** Read Genesis 6:13-14. What was Noah's appointed job description, his great purpose at this time in his life?
4. **The Change Agent:** Read Genesis 6:8-9 and 6:22-7:1. What are the attributes of a person who can bring positive change to the world around them? What obstacles might this engender?
5. **Obstacles:** Read Genesis 6:17-21. Genesis 6:3 suggests that it took Noah 120 years to build the ark. What kinds of difficulties would he encounter as he sought to achieve his objective? What obstacles do you face in your journey with God?
6. **Mission Accomplished:** Read Genesis 7:24-8:1, 8:15-17, and 9:1-3. How was Noah's destiny fulfilled? What were the implications to humanity and living creatures?
7. **Historical Epilogue:** Read Genesis 8:20-22 and 9:15-16. How did this conclude and what are the implications of these actions?
8. **Personal Perspective:** What do you think your destiny is? What has God called you to be and do? What do you believe in strongly enough to work for it even against great opposition?

Dr. Charles Malik, a leading author of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and President of the 13th session of the General Assembly, concluded: "The needs of the world are much deeper than political freedom and security, much deeper than social injustice and economic development, much deeper than democracy and progress. The deeper needs of the world belong to the sphere of the mind, the heart, and the spirit, a sphere to be penetrated with the light and grace of Jesus Christ."

*We are Christ's ambassadors, and God is using us to speak to you.
We urge you, as though Christ himself were here pleading with you, "Be reconciled to God!"
(2 Corinthians 5:20 NLT)*