Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics

Edited by
David F. Wright
Senior Lecturer in Ecclesiastical History,
New College, University of Edinburgh

Morehouse-Barlow Co., Inc.
Wilton, Connecticut 06897

ISBN 0-8192-1326-8

First edition published 1979
The Paternoster Press Ltd.
The Paternoster House
3 Mount Radford Crescent
Exeter, England EX2 4JW

First U.S. edition published 1983
Morehouse-Barlow Co., Inc.
78 Danbury Road
Wilton, Connecticut 06897

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 82-62581

Printed in the United States of America

Chapter Seven

Human Rights

John Gladwin

CHAPTER SEVEN

Human Rights

The Evangelical Dilemma

> I BELIEVE WE ARE HUNG UP ON 'RIGHTS'. PLEASE DON'T misunderstand. I am all for human rights, for equality, for the right of every person to make his or her unique contribution to the world. My fear is that, in our struggle for rights, we have gone so far that we are in danger of forgetting how redemptive the voluntary laying aside of certain 'rights' can be. It's possible that the demand for our rights can become a self-centred way of life.[1]

There we have expressed, in somewhat emotive language, the dilemma of evangelical Christianity when facing the human rights movement. On the one hand, we do not want to be found upholding tyranny and oppression in either its crude or its subtle forms in society. On the other hand, talk of and campaigning for human rights seems to betray something at the heart of the gospel. 'He who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it' (Matt. 10: 38-39).

At one level, one can have a lot of sympathy with much evangelical reticence in getting involved and committed in the socio-political cauldron of the modern world. So much that is

1. Ann Smith, in *Vital Christianity* 15.1.1978.

going on takes place in a context of alien thinking marked by conflict which all too often breaks out in actual violence, with tyranny replacing tyranny, and little apparent common ground to appeal to for socio-political conduct.

Yet I believe that the gospel leaves us no choice. If it is about the saving word of God coming to us in the midst of history and change, and if it concerns the saving of human life through the self-offering and life of the man Christ Jesus, then it sets its children unavoidably in compassionate concern for human life, in all its turmoil, in the heart of the history of the world. Today it is impossible to consider our response to our neighbour outside of the social context which shapes him and which in turn he shapes. I cannot avoid standing next to another who, for whatever reason, struggles on behalf of the victims of the world, seeking to protect the weak and the poor from the strong and to establish their human rights in the face of the endeavours of power to exclude them for factional and short-term interest. It is God who chooses the weak and the foolish to confound the strong and the wise. This has been the mark of his saving work from its outset in our history.

Moreover, at the level of the shaping of the human mind and in the ongoing process of developing and reforming norms of social activity, the contemporary concern for human rights leads us on to consider our own understanding of the nature and purpose of human life, the duties and powers of political institutions, and the relationship of freedom and justice, and always in the context of our commitment to Jesus Christ. Great biblical themes are touched upon in this issue.

It is with this latter level — the shaping of our minds — that we are primarily concerned in this conference, not in detachment from the daily pressures of politics, human suffering and pain, but in our fundamental commitment and concern to influence and develop a praxis in conformity to the gospel as witnessed to in Holy Scripture. We want God's word to become a living and blazing fire in our bones which cannot be contained but bursts out of our beings in action for our neighbour.

Enlightenment Beginnings

Where, however, are we to begin in considering the develop-

ment of the human rights movement and its root principles? My choice of the Enlightenment may seem an arbitrary one. We must begin somewhere remembering that our choice of starting point is itself set in a context of history. However, I do believe that the changing philosophical themes of the Enlightenment, in the context of the political developments of the eighteenth century, marked such a step forward in our western society that thought and experience, human expectations and norms of conduct, were shifted in a new direction. Empiricism, a love of reason, a search for the natural order, and a philosophical and political concern for the 'inalienable rights of man' come to life in the eighteenth-century context. Such thinking and struggle takes on political reality in the shape of the American Constitution, in the declarations of the French Revolution, and in the writings of Tom Paine. From Locke at the end of the seventeenth century to Rousseau in the eighteenth century we encompass a range of developing thought about the nature of politics and the relationship of the individual to the political community which has left a lasting imprint upon the mind of subsequent generations.

Evangelical Antecedents

Before we comment upon this tradition and where it leads us today, it is worth noting that we, as Evangelicals, are not without forebears in this business of concern for the rights of people as citizens and members of human society. It may be that part of our trouble is that we are children of another eighteenth-century reality, the evangelical awakening, which stood in opposition to the rationalism of its times and was derided as 'enthusiasm', which Bishop Butler called 'a very horrid thing'.[2] Although that revival did lead into practical and compassionate activity in society, such as the movement to abolish the slave trade, the work of the Clapham Sect, and later on the work of Shaftesbury and others, it never produced a rounded theology of church and society. For this reason, at least in part, piety and reason, religion and politics, have been set in tension with each other in the evangelical tradition.

Yet, we have a larger inheritance than that represented in

2. See G. R. Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason, 1648-1789* (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 150.

the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century awakenings. There are other places in history from which we take sustenance. The Reformation, for example, as one such place in the Christian past, did seek a concept of social order. It struggled deeply with the meaning of its developing theology for the state and for the activity of government. It sought to come to terms with the extent and the limits of political power and with the duties and rights of citizens and of the officers of the law in the face of tyranny.[3] Even if in our retrospective judgement both Luther and Calvin failed to drive home the full significance of their understanding of freedom in Christ alone for the political order, the shape of a theology appropriate to the issues is still present in their work.

It was not only mainstream Protestant history and thinking, but also the Anabaptist tradition which contributed to the development of our freedoms. As Alan Kreider has shown, in a paper given at the Westminster Conference in 1975, the Baptists had a clear understanding of the extent and limits of state power. Their name has been spoilt by some of the wild and extreme social and religious experimentation on the fringes of the movement.[4]

In our own country we owe more than is sometimes admitted to the Puritan tradition and its struggle in the seventeenth century. The commitment of our state institutions to the rule of law and to the subjection of government to the rule of law owes much to the Puritans' refusal to yield absolute authority to any but God himself. It was they who took on the brunt of the struggle against the Stuart idea of the divine right of kings.

So, if this subject appears to be a strange one for modern evangelical ears, it is not because it lacks precedent in the past but rather because of our neglect in our more recent experience. Thankfully, in this highly political age, there are signs that the movement is looking to rectify these more recent omissions so that we in our turn can make our contribution to the development of a proper biblical understanding of politics, of the state, and of citizenship.

Locke and Social Contract

In considering the central issue at stake in the human rights

3. John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* IV:20:31-32.
4. Alan Kreider, 'The Anabaptists', in *The Christian and the State in Revolutionary Times* (London, 1975), pp. 28ff.

movement we must consider the development of the philosophy and politics of rights in the period of the Enlightenment. In a wholly prejudiced comment on Rousseau, given under the cover of academic objectivity, Bertrand Russell sets the scene for us:

> Ever since his time, those who considered themselves reformers have been divided into two groups, those who followed him (Rousseau) and those who followed Locke. Sometimes they co-operated, and many individuals saw no incompatibility. But gradually the incompatibility has become increasingly evident. At the present time, Hitler is the outcome of Rousseau; Roosevelt and Churchill, of Locke.[5]

In itself, Russell's statement is an insolence to Rousseau and excessively charitable to both Roosevelt and Churchill. Yet, in a perverse sort of way, it highlights the key issue for us over human rights and the problem associated with them.

In his exposition of Locke, Russell points out that the social contract idea is hinted at in Aquinas, clearly explicated in Grotius, and given a particular form in Locke. We may note in them all a common concern to discover the natural law or the natural order. There is a given order of things, laws which define the proper boundaries of what ought or ought not to pertain. It is this natural order, and its partner, the natural and inalienable rights of men, which are at the foundation of the creation of civil society. According to Locke, society is founded not upon some direct link between divine authority and the institutions of government but upon the voluntary yielding to the community of individual rights for the protection of life and property. Therefore, rather than having an absolute authority to do as it pleases, government has a power and responsibility which derive from their origin in the inalienable rights of individuals over life and property. In his Hamlyn Lectures entitled *Liberty, Law and Justice* Sir Norman Anderson says, 'It is not always realized that it was the doctrine of Natural Law which was the direct progenitor of the concept of Human Rights'.[6] He maintains that rationalism turned a concept of natural law, founded upon the divine order, into one of natural rights which stands in its own autonomy on the foundation of human reason.

For Locke, the social contract is something which people make as a way of protecting their natural rights in society. So

5. Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London, 1946), p. 660.
6. J. N. D. Anderson, *Liberty, Law and Justice* (London, 1978), pp. 19ff.

the protection of individual rights is the purpose of the social contract and consent is its means. In a formative work entitled *A Theory of Justice* John Rawls has sought to revive the social contract theory for our own time.[7] He is concerned to provide a firmer foundation for the survival of liberal democracy than is provided in the predominant utilitarianism of our century. Rawls asks what a group of rational people, thinking about the basis of society without knowing how history would treat them or others in society, would agree to concerning the normative principles on which such a society would function. By insisting that such a group work from a position of ignorance about the eventual outcome, Rawls has sought to remove all that might prejudice sound rational judgement. Such a group of people, claims Rawls, would arrive at a social contract which they would accept as binding whatever the outcome. That social contract would have two foundation principles. Its basic commitment would be to freedom. Equal liberty would be a fundamental principle. The second principle after liberty would be that of justice — an agreement to economic and social sharing. Liberty is basic but it needs justice as its partner to guarantee a fair and reasonable society. Whenever society was faced with a demand which infringed these principles its basic commitment to the contract would enable it to draw back. Political and legal institutions would enshrine the principles of the contract. The right to liberty and to justice would be guaranteed by contract.

There is a strong tendency in the social contract tradition to see man in the social context as a bundle of rights which it is the duty of society to safeguard. In the eighteenth-century debate this was seen as basic to the natural order of things and therefore basic to proper political reasoning. This can be seen in the Declaration of Independence in the United States of America, where it is asserted as self-evident 'that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights', including life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In the declaration of the French National Assembly in 1789 it was 'resolved to lay down in a solemn Declaration, the natural, inalienable and sacred Rights of Man'.

This has set the context for political thinking and action over human rights ever since. The experience of tyranny and

7. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971).

oppression in our own century have increased public concern for human rights throughout the world. The experience of the holocaust in Nazi Germany and of the Second World War led to the creation of the United Nations and to its own Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. All member states are committed to this declaration. The continued experience of genocide and mass political extermination, of the gross abuse of political power in torture and oppression all over the modern world, has added to the sense of urgency in many quarters to see governments practise a commitment to the U.N. Declaration. Since 1948 the concern for rights has spread beyond that of political rights *vis-à-vis* the state, to economic and social rights of a very diverse kind. Sir Norman Anderson's Hamlyn Lectures detail the flood of declarations and statements on rights which cover economic, cultural, legal, political, social and sexual matters.[8] So what was once a classic small list of essential rights — life, liberty, happiness, property — has become a great bundle of rights. We now talk about children's rights, women's rights, gay rights, animal rights, and so on across a wide field of concern.

If Christians have difficulty assenting to the confidence of the eighteenth-century rationalists in the capacity of reason to discover from the natural order universally agreed foundations for the social defence of universally justifiable rights of men, how much more are we going to have trouble providing a secure basis for our modern extension of the list of rights? If there is a danger within the social contract and rights tradition from Grotius onwards of considering it possible to provide justification for society without any reference to the creator, Christians are going to be very wary of any tendency in modern thought to close political order in on itself and leave it no defence against those who, for a variety of reasons, will not uphold what others consider to be reasonable and right.

In this sense Sir Norman's concern to secure natural law inside a creation order is a proper concern to drive us to think about the nature and work of God undergirding social order. This way of thinking about human activity in society — of viewing people in society in terms of rights and set in contractual relationships to each other and to government — contains the danger of undermining neighbourly love in community. In Locke, the prime reason for having society is for

8. *Op. cit.* pp. 40f.

the defence of certain basic rights. The defence of my neighbour's rights is effectively a way of protecting my own. Thus there is a strong individualism running through this tradition in the human rights/social contract idea. Society is seen here as a careful balance in which I pass over to the state the responsibility to defend my life and property for the sake of peace and order. The strong individualism of the autonomous man in such thinking has contributed to the development of political democracy and limits to state power. However, in its inherent selfishness over rights it runs the risk of cutting the individual off from being bound to his neighbour in a bond of free and unselfish service.

Rousseau and Collectivism

As Bertrand Russell has suggested, Rousseau represents a wholly different type of tradition. There can be no doubt about his influence on the modern world. Rousseau tried to resolve the problems of the individual and society and of freedom and justice. He has had a very bad press in many quarters of which Russell would be a good example. Interestingly enough, one of the most sympathetic and penetrating analyses of his work *Du Contract Social* is the one by Karl Barth in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*. Rousseau understood society to be a matter of secondary order. The natural order has been lost to us. In the natural order human life was marked by pure individual freedom. Society, as we know it, was created by man through the acquisition of property. 'The first man who, having enclosed a piece of land, bethought himself of saying "This is mine" and found enough to believe him was the real founder of civil society.'[9]

Rousseau was concerned that this secondary creation of civil society should be marked by the justice which was present in the original natural order (now lost). This is how Barth understands Rousseau:

> The problem of the state is rather how to bring about a union between men which by its corporate might shields every individual in such a manner that he is at once one with the whole and yet free, and free — i.e. obeying himself alone — by virtue of this very consent. The basic act which represents the answer

9. Cited from *Oeuvres de J. J. Rousseau* (Amsterdam, 1769), vol. 2, by Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1972), p. 188.

> to this problem is an act of submission, the complete transference by the individual of all his rights to the community as such. It is precisely by everyone giving himself completely — not to somebody but to all, and not all as the sum of every individual, but to all as the public person which has arisen out of their union.[10]

So Rousseau introduced the concept of the sovereignty of the people, not as a company of individuals but as the public person to which all have yielded their rights voluntarily — not to the state as government within society, but the whole people together. Rousseau added to this the idea that the general will of the people could be expressed through the majority. Rousseau does not say that the state gives rights, but that in the social contract the individual has yielded his rights and exercises them henceforth only through the collective will of the people who together form the public person. In this way Rousseau and collectivism have a great deal in common. It does not surprise us, therefore, to find political thinkers like Mao to be students of Rousseau.

If the problem of liberal democracy, in the tradition of Locke, is the threat of a selfish individualism to the well-being of the community, the problem of collectivism is its constant threat to the integrity of the individual. In practice this type of theory easily degenerates into state manipulation of individuals into the given ideal pattern for social order.

Thus in collectivist states the problem for human rights is the constant attack on individuals who do not voluntarily conform to the social theory the creation of the state. In Marxist countries, where in theory there ought to be a movement towards the perfect order in which government and state disappear, politics gets stuck in practice at the point of the maximum state commitment to the moulding of the whole life of the community into a specific social pattern. Thus the individual conscience is threatened, in collectivism, by the heteronomous state.

Tension Between Freedom and Justice

At the heart of this matter is the classic problem of the relationship of freedom and justice. If we say that man (and I use the term in its generic sense to cover both male and female

10. *Ibid.*

persons equally) possesses inalienable rights and then try to define them (e.g. the U.N. Declaration 1948, the European Convention 1950), what happens when these rights seem to be in conflict with each other? The practical deployment of rights involves others in the community. Consider the abortion debate as an example. If, as some say, the woman is to have the final say over the fate of the foetus because it is her body and she is carrying the child so that it is an affront to her autonomy for others to have a decisive voice in the matter, how is this position to be matched with the close involvement of others in the problem? Does not the unborn child have rights, and does not the father have rights? If one group are saying 'the woman's rights' and another 'the child's rights' and yet a third 'the father's rights', how is the clash to be resolved except through struggle and the law trying to act as an umpire in the middle? This way of understanding the matter is implicitly destructive of mutual love and service, in this case in the small community of the family.

Let us consider a wider social issue, rights in education. We may talk of 'parents' rights' and provide an element of choice within an education system to preserve the rights of parents. Yet children have rights as well; how are these to be protected against the abuse of parental rights? What if, in a desire to preserve the rights of parents, the rights of children are severely limited? As one headmaster of a comprehensive school said to me recently, 'Parental choice means a perpetuation of advantage for already advantaged groups of children'. Are human rights and freedoms now in fundamental conflict with the claims of justice?

It is problems like these which drive the state to collectivist solutions. Yet, if it is a collectivist type of social contract, what is to happen to those citizens who wish to live quiet and peaceful lives and yet for reasons of conscience cannot conform to every aspect of the collective ideal? The problems of minority groups in the state are age-old. Minority race groups like the Jews, the sects, and other minority religious groups, are continually under pressure in strong states committed to definitive ideologies of politics.

The highlighting of these problems in human rights thinking from the Enlightenment on is not aimed at detaching Christians from a commitment to many of the issues at stake in the modern human rights movement. Indeed, it is important to say that the silent inactivity of Christians in the face of tyranny and oppression is a sin against God in its failure to

act for one's neighbour in his time of need. What we are concerned about is the shape of mind which lies at the roots of the movement. Practical trouble is bound to persist if inadequate thinking underlies the action. In particular, that sort of thinking which appears to suggest that individuals possess 'rights' to be given or kept in relation to the community or that the state can withhold or bestow these rights, seems bound to lead to a conflict between freedom and justice to be resolved only in a delicate and uneasy contract in civil society.

In making these criticisms one cannot but be aware of the lack of a serious evangelical contribution to this vital social question. If, in looking at the buildings which others have created to provide a defence against tyranny, we can see some weaknesses, some cracks, some badly guarded points, we have to confess that we have still to attend to laying foundations, let alone putting up a structure which will survive the insidious attacks of the oppressors. Our task must have humility as its virtue and modesty in its claims.

Christian Contribution to the Human Rights Issue

The biblical witness leaves us no choice but compassionate identification in the struggle for justice for the many who suffer through their powerlessness at the hands of tyrants and oppressors. This commitment shares, in its own way, in the search for a more human politics. The knowledge of God and compassionate involvement cannot be torn asunder in Christian thought and practice. It is the gospel which provides us with the clues to a way forward.

A good deal of the theological ground-work for this subject is dependent on the contributions *Man in Society* and *Towards a Theology of the State* contained elsewhere in this volume. I cannot avoid touching briefly on three themes to do with our understanding of man.

1. *Man is created* in the image and likeness of God. We believe that what man is and possesses is a consequence of the graciousness of God our creator. Life has its origin and its purpose in God and depends upon him for its continuance and well-being. It is through creation and because of the covenant God has made with man that man enjoys the place which he does in the world with his neighbours. This continues to be the case, even in a fallen and corrupt world, by the grace of God. After the flood, God made a covenant with

Noah promising to bless him and his descendants and never again to destroy the earth by flood. Underneath our life together in the world are the grace and concern of God our creator. What we are has its origin not within ourselves nor in human society but in God. So we are bound to be cautious about talk of rights as though they are a personal and individualistic possession or as though they are within the gift of the state or the community at large. The autonomy of the individual or the heteronomy of the community implicit in the anthropocentric approach of the humanist tradition cannot adequately bear the full weight of the Christian understanding of man who has his freedom and his life as a gift and stewardship from God.

2. What man possesses from God as a free gift is to be used in ways which reflect the graciousness of the Giver. In our outgoing relationships in family and society we are to deploy the good gifts of God within the pattern learnt from God's own generosity to us. So the grace of God sets its own limits and boundaries to human conduct and to the use of such gifts as power in society. Just as Christian freedom and license do not go together neither do *responsible stewardship* and absolutism in society. It is God who teaches me that I am to exercise the power and gifts over which I have control not so much in pursuit of my freedom and happiness (with the restriction that this must not be at others' expense, as in John Rawls' idea) as creatively for others in support of their human well-being.

3. Christians locate the problem of the individual in conflict with society and its claims in the effects of *our human fallenness.* It is our loss of the knowledge and love of God which has destroyed creative community and shut in the individual behind a wall of shame, making him afraid of the world and of commitment to others. It is this fearful individual when brought into society who continually runs the risk of exploiting what power comes his way in self-defence against others who appear to threaten him as he does them.

The Gospel and Human Rights

Man as creature, man as responsible steward, and man as fallen are an integral part of the Christian faith as it approaches the dilemma over human rights. Let us consider

man, in addition to this, in the light of the central theme of our Christian faith — the gospel. It is after all the gospel of the free unmerited grace of God to sinners in Jesus Christ, received through faith, which is at the heart of our evangelical experience. At the centre of this is the gracious work of God for us in the self-giving of Jesus Christ to the extremity of death on the cross for the sin of mankind. The key to the new life in the world of God's kingdom is to be found in Jesus Christ crucified and risen. What can we learn about human rights from the man from heaven?

1. We learn of *one who, perfectly established in his Father's freedom and will, spared no cost in meeting the needs of others.* Tempted to assert his power and status for self-interest and glory, he set his face in another direction in which he was called to give without limit in compassionate response to the needs of others. Here is a way of love which achieves something for the world as well as setting it an example in human life of the character of love itself. Christ's love is actually creative in achieving its purpose and thereby creating a new community called to witness to the kingdom of God. In Christ freedom, experienced in the knowledge and love of God, leads to service through self-giving without limit for the sake of a broken and fallen world.

The God who is the giver of life, who is its source and sustenance, and who alone has an ultimate right over life, is the one who in his Son gives life for the freedom of a fallen and enslaved humanity.

It is the love of God manifest in Jesus Christ which reveals the eternal value which God places upon human life and which the world abuses, spoiling the gifts he gives it. Here we see a holy identification with man in his wretchedness and weakness. This is the love which responds in freedom and compassion to the victims of the world — the poor, the sick, the rejected, and the powerless. Those, therefore, who look for their own lives to grow into the image of the life of the man from heaven are called to validate their commitment through this heavenly love shaping their human relationships and concerns. The struggle with and for the victims of power abuse in the world in the practical outworking of compassion is central to obedience to the love of God.

We must not run away from the practical demands for action because it will mean sharing concerns with others who may not share our convictions. Even though the humanist building has weaknesses in its structure, if its practical con-

cerns fall within the boundaries of the demands of compassion and justice in the light of the gospel we must share them in the political arena. A theology for politics which is necessarily detached and implicitly perfectionist cannot hope to cope with the practical demands for present action. The problems for Christian action of this sort can be illustrated from a conversation which I had with a member of the anti-Nazi League.

This young Christian was concerned both by the domination of that organization by the Socialist Workers Party and by the almost total lack of support for him and other concerned Christians from the church in the struggle against the bully boys who scapegoat the ethnic minority groups for the ills of our society. He was concerned at the risks of his commitment and the loneliness of his chosen path in the Christian fellowship.

2. The gospel teaches us that *the act of yielding rights and power in the cause of justice is creative for human life and possibilities.* It is not those who stand on their rights who achieve the truly human goals. Those who run the risks, refuse to stand by their position and their life and are ready to try new things irrespective of the possible cost to self — they are the ones who through compassion open up hope in social activity. 'Let this mind be in you which was in Jesus Christ, who being in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God; but made himself of no reputation, and took upon himself the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men' (Phil. 2:5ff.).

Christ achieves our salvation through action in which power and status are yielded for others, and thereby calls a new humanity into being. There are many situations today where the conflict is between power grimly held on to and rights demanded and fought for through struggle. Southern Africa offers an obvious example. If only those who possess the power and the rights knew the way of freedom in risking their position for the possibility of a new community founded on justice! The determination of power that it shall not fall into other hands forces those on the receiving end of its abuses into deeper and deeper conflict and struggle. Here the risks are that the community will be so badly fractured in the struggle that factionalism and strife will continue to mark the life of society into the distant future. The abuses of power lead to communities asserting their own human dignity through the discovery of the integrity of their own separate

life and culture — black consciousness, red consciousness, women's consciousness. The danger is always present, however, that such 'consciousness' will attempt to fossilize itself at the point of division and so lose the possibility of a common fellowship of black and white, male and female, Protestant and Catholic, Jew and Arab beyond the stereotyped ghetto politics of struggle. If the struggle against oppression offers the possibility of a new beginning for society it always runs the risk of collapsing beyond victory into a new oppression. The legitimate Christian presence in the struggle for the removal of the indignities imposed upon many groups in our world by the powerful must be a presence which seeks to humanize power and the struggle for it, by means of the Christian story of the one who was both willing and able to yield self creatively for others.

3. The third truth which becomes apparent in the gospel is *the fundamental respect which we ought to have for the integrity of the consciences of other people.* The way of Jesus Christ, of self-emptying, of yielding rights, is a way which meets others with freedom in forgiveness. Christ does not barge through the protective wall of our conscience and our shame. The gospel does not involve a rape of the individual person. Indeed the gospel presents us with Jesus Christ as the one who alone has the right to approach the inner self because he comes to justify rather than condemn, to forgive rather than to judge. Because of his unique work in redemption, because he has known our human predicament, even to the point of the cross, he comes to us as a brother affirming our dignity. Because he approaches us as the one who alone can still our troubled and guilty consciences he can approach the inner sanctuary of our heart. Because he approaches with the free gift of love and does not come as an oppressor to make impossible demands of us he alone can turn us from the fearful self-protection which marks our living towards a new way of service in love and so to growth to maturity in human life.

Such a gospel points us to a new way in which the fundamental freedom and integrity of the person becomes the foundation for true fellowship in service through Christ. When we have been met by Jesus Christ bringing us good news we can no longer treat others in ways which infringe their dignity and sanctity of life. The basic integrity of another cannot be raped by any form of social or personal manipulation by any one whose life has found freedom in

forgiveness through Jesus Christ. The individualism of the gospel leads towards community. It leads towards a community in which differences in human life and personal experience do not become, as in a fallen world, a cause for the breakdown of community, but the seed-bed of a fellowship which emphasises both the *common* humanity of all and the importance of *diversity* within the whole.

Human relationships in the church which are patterned on Christ's love for us witness in the world to a way in which human dignity and community are established in service to others. In the midst of the world's struggle to guard human rights and dignity the Christian testimony to Jesus Christ 'salts' the wider concern for rights. The Christian presence is vital in this aspect of our life in the world.

4. If true freedom is established by the grace of God and my life is made forfeit at the cross and restored to me as a gift in the service of the kingdom of God, then *my participation in the politics of the present time does not have to be inhibited by fear of what will happen to self.* Neither intimidation from outside nor the paralysis of fear within need prevent me taking needed action in service of others. The provisional character of politics does not act as a barrier to Christian action. We know that we are in transition from one order to another. All our life is limited by the knowledge that we work in faith and that the shape of the future is seen only 'through a glass darkly'. Limits are no threat to Christian freedom and the provisional character of political decision-making is not necessarily destructive of the Christian conscience. In this sense the various declarations on human rights together with the contemporary concern for the issue, may, despite their problematic language and thought-form, be seen as a useful and important political means of setting human limits to power and of protecting the life and worth of every citizen in society. Politics committed to such a concern for 'human rights' are always pursuing those provisional and limited solutions in the present which hold us to our aims and which achieve realistic and human goals in social relationships. Such political work requires a sympathetic participation by Christian people.

So in Christian social ethics there is both the given and the changing. The given is Jesus Christ, incarnate, crucified, risen and glorified, as the pattern for Christian life and work. The changing is the human social context. The Christian question concerns the significance of commitment to Jesus

Christ in the contemporary and changing social context. The contemporary context is the place in which we learn to grow towards the shape of life which is given in Jesus Christ. The practical politics of a love which is about serving and enabling life for others must be continually worked on and often fought for. They must not be culturally, philosophically or structurally fossilized. They must cope with change avoiding romanticism about the past, the baptism of the politics of the present and utopianism about the future. They must take seriously what Jesus said about the kingdom of God: 'Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say 'Lo here it is', or 'There', for behold the kingdom of God is in the midst of you." ' (Luke 17:20f.) Responses to particular issues should be viewed as examples of how Christians fulfil a responsible discipleship in the social order rather than as fixed and definitive answers which cannot be revised as understanding and circumstances change. Let us now briefly consider three examples.

Abortion

We have already commented on abortion earlier in this paper. In its own life the church approaches such decision-making in the context of the love of Jesus Christ which helps us to both give and receive. The struggle for individual rights — the rights of mother, child, father — must give way to a concern to make choices from the position of each in the terms of the needs of the others.

The mother must think of her decision in the light of the needs of the family and the sanctity of the life committed to her in conception. The father must think of the well-being of the mother and family. In such a context any decision for an abortion involves the whole community in a readiness to share in the cost of such a choice. The decision to give up life can never be taken out of self-interest or callously. Such a choice, in circumstances where, for example, the life of the mother is at risk, is always costly and needs the responsive love of others ready to support and to share.

In the wider community the attitude of the law must be determined by the way the community behaves. If the issue is seen in the terms of the struggle over rights, then law must

take what steps it can to protect the weakest and most vulnerable people. An especial concern for the unborn child is an aspect of such concern.

Zimbabwe

The Christian community is present on either side of the struggle in Zimbabwe.[11] Its concern for the effect of the gospel upon the struggle may well assume different expressions according to the position Christians are in. Among the white community, for example, Christians need to witness to the creative possibilities for justice and peace in the yielding of power in the service of others. If, in the stubborn selfishness of power which refuses to take imaginative and effective action committed to justice for everyone, the judgement falls in the form of escalating violence and conflict, then Christians must have the courage to be the presence which speaks about judgement in political terms.

On the other side, as Christians identify with the struggle against the excesses of illegal and unconstitutional power and for a just and equal society in which race plays no political role, Christians need to both share in the suffering of a refugee people and enable those who fight to understand how chaos and violence threaten the future realization of their political aims. Christians must watch out for the opportunities for generosity which can help in creating peace without compromising justice.

The presence of Christians, whose fellowship is wider than the immediate context of the struggle and whose horizons should be further than the immediate choices, is in itself a witness against the adequacy of factionalism and a pointer to the new humanity of God's kingdom in Jesus Christ.

A Bill of Rights?

Our analysis of human rights and our commitment to a politics of hope and creative possibilities in the service of others encourages us to ask some searching questions about the present longing for a bill of rights.

Is this a 'Stop the world I want to get off' type of demand?

11. This comment antedated the settlement leading to independence in 1980.

Is this a guise for attempting to fossilize our constitutional arrangements against future development? It could be a dodge from engaging in political argument — a desire to have game, set and match before the first server has completed the first game. The strengths and weaknesses of fixed constitutional norms can be seen in places like the U.S.A. and India which have a written constitution guaranteed by the courts. Although the American tradition did eventually rescue the nation from the Nixon abuses, the fact of their happening and almost succeeding must make us cautious about how much can be achieved through trying to fix the system in a certain type of way. The best of fixed systems are more easily abused than sometimes we countenance.

It is one thing to enact a list of rights. It is quite another to see them put into practice. This is one of the problems with the various declarations on the subject. Declarations are good and laudable, but enforcement requires political will, choice and power. Christians are among those good at enunciating principles but not so good at wrestling with the actualities of power and seeing that things get done. Greater experience among us at this level would certainly underline the value of commitments to principles of justice. It would confront us with the central political realities of choice and with the challenge to give shape to the gospel at that point in social work.

The contemporary concern for human rights sets the context for much Christian witness in society today. We need to respond critically to the ideological roots of this concern and activity for people in a world where power is great and greatly abused. We need also to understand our own foundations in Jesus Christ, whose work achieved redemption and a new kingdom for the world. In this way, accepting our own limitations and working with a proper humility, we will seek, in identifying with the human concerns of those who work for rights, to bring the salt of the kingdom into a vital sphere of political life and work today. Above all else, such a Christian presence will share with any who endeavour to keep open the doors of hope in the face of the tyrants who desire to see them shut.

Reading List

J. N. D. Anderson, *Liberty, Law and Justice* (London, 1978).
D. Field, *Taking Sides: Ecology, Abortion, Divorce, Work, Race* (Leicester, 1975).
G. Forster, *Race and Responsibility* (Bramcote, Notts., 1965).
R. F. R. Gardner, *Abortion, the Personal Dilemma* (Exeter, 1972).
P. Sookhdeo (ed.), *All One in Christ?* (London, 1974).
J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, 1972).
R. Moore, 'Christianity and Human Rights', in *Christian Faith and Political Hopes*, ed. H. Willmer (London, 1979), pp. 47-64.
C. J. H. Wright, *Human Rights: A Study in Biblical Themes* (Bramcote, Notts., 1979).

Questions for Discussion

1 What are the strengths and weaknesses of saying that people do not have rights, but only responsibilities?

2 What is our assessment of the positions adopted by President Carter and the Soviet Union on human rights?

3 What is the political force for us of our commitment to Jesus Christ as the one who gave himself and his life in free obedient love for a broken and fallen world?

4 What has been missing from our evangelical thinking and experience to have made us so reticent about sharing in concern for human rights?