

Human rights rooted in Bible, not political philosophy

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ATLANTA—Concern about human rights means biblically grounded compassion for oppressed people—not a selfish desire to protect one's own property or prestige, Baptist ethicist Glen Stassen told the National Summit on Torture.

Glen Stassen, a Baptist ethicist at Fuller Theological Seminary, told the National Summit on Torture human rights is deeply rooted in the Bible, not just in Western political philosophy.

(PHOTO/Stephen Jones)

"It has been the defenders of the unjust status quo and unequal privileges who have said: 'Christians should not push for human rights. Human rights are selfish,'" he told the interfaith conference at Mercer University.

"My theme is that human rights are about caring for those who can be victimized by the more powerful."

Stassen, the Lewis B. Smedes professor of Christian ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary, insisted human rights are rooted in the Bible and in religious teaching that predated any Enlightenment emphasis on possessive individualism.

He urged churches—particularly in the free-church Baptist tradition—to reclaim their heritage.

“Human rights are our baby, coming from the struggle for the right to religious liberty—well before the Enlightenment,” he said.

Richard Overton—one of the earliest Baptists, alongside John Smyth and Thomas Helwys—articulated a call for human rights during the free-church struggle for religious liberty in Puritan England, he noted.

Writing in 1645, Overton urged full religious liberty for all people, economic justice for the poor and expansion of civil liberties—including “the right not to be arbitrarily arrested nor forced to incriminate oneself; the right to speedy trial; the right to understand the law in one’s own language; equality before the law; and the right of prisoners not to be starved, tortured or extorted,” Stassen noted.

Christians care about human rights because it is a teaching grounded in the Gospels. Jesus cared about people, Stassen insisted. 

“He cared for people with so much compassion that he confronted the authorities over the wrongs they were doing,” he said.

Jesus confronted religious authorities over four types of injustice, Stassen noted:

- Greed. “Human rights emphasizes the positive right to life as having the basics needed to pursue a life’s calling.”
- Exclusion. “Human rights emphasizes the human right to community.”
- Domination. “Human rights emphasizes the rights to liberty and to the means to check and balance unjust authority.”
- Violence. “Human rights emphasizes the right to life.”

"They are not four arbitrary types of injustice; they are deeply grounded in the prophetic tradition of God's own caring for the powerless and the deprived and the oppressed," Stassen added.

"They are based in God's caring, and in God's own realism about who needs standing up for in a world of greed, oppression, domination, exclusion, violence—a world of sin."

And nations are as prone to sin as individuals, he insisted.

"The temptation to sin is the greater the more powerful you are, and our nation is very powerful," Stassen insisted.

"So, we badly need the check and balance of humility enough to listen to other nations, to restore international cooperation, to respect international law."