

Right or Wrong? Human & civil rights

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Are “civil rights” and “human rights” synonymous? How are these terms interrelated? In what contexts are they used appropriately?

In the spring of 1968, garbage workers in Memphis, Tenn., picketed with signs that read, “Am I not a man?” This statement was a direct challenge to the inhumane treatment and working conditions faced by the workers. Martin Luther King Jr. eventually would support this group and utter the words in his final speech, “We will get to the Promised Land.” Are “civil rights” and “human rights” synonymous? These ideas—humanity and dignity—reveal the challenge every civilization must face.

Human rights and civil rights are not synonymous. Essentially, human rights are those that reflect one’s humanity; therefore, acknowledging the humanity of others enables me to discern my own self. Civil rights relate to those that are prescribed in a given social context. The American narrative indicates human rights are revealed in the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness. Failure to treat others with dignity is to dehumanize them.

Freedom and creativity

Brian Stone indicates the life given by the Creator is one that manifests freedom and creativity. A person cannot fully embrace freedom without also experiencing creativity, he states. Therefore, creativity is an inalienable right. This necessitates that American Christians discern whether we are right in our thoughts about God and our actions toward one another. Any discussion on human rights must embrace the reality of America’s ambivalence toward African-Americans or marginalized people in general.

My entry point into black history has been somewhat of a puzzle. As a public school student, I learned bits and pieces of that history—slave ships, plantations and cotton, and the March on Washington. These images conceal many events and people who positively affected American society. And yet history tends to be silent regarding their humanity and contributions. From their standpoint, it is a matter of embracing my humanity and treating me with civility. These ideas are revealed in Christ's words regarding love as both spiritual and social. This reality is broader than merely advocating civil rights. In essence, we are called to regard each person's humanity, regardless of their life condition.

Ideas without practice

I often challenge my students: "We spend so much time trying to be Christian that we fail at being human." This may be difficult to receive when one's idea of living faithfully is reduced to ideas without practice. Words tend to be shallow; therefore, in Christ the words became flesh and dwelt among us. Can there be any greater challenge for us as we learn to relate to honor one another?

Honoring a person's human rights is essential to life's fulfillment because it is fundamental to communal development. Engaging basic humanity enables one to build civil actions upon it. To pursue these ideas in reverse order is to undermine the divine influence on communal development. In essence, the Christian faith honors the human being because the individual is, in American nomenclature, endowed with inalienable (human) rights by its Creator.

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