

6 Reasons to Celebrate UN Declaration on Its 'Birthday'

Birthdays were a big deal in my family.

Great-uncles, aunts and cousins, it didn't matter how young or old, how close or distant, there was at least one day a year when you were celebrated.

I didn't think about it as a child. Birthdays were a part of the furniture. But as I look back, I realize how vitally affirming it was.

For some in my extended family, I expect it was one of the few days of the year when multiple people were saying, "We're glad you were born" (or some semantic equivalent).

The world is having a birthday. Yes, the globe of human beings. We celebrated the 70th birthday of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR) on Dec. 10.

This anniversary is worthy of our attention. Throw a party. Write a letter. Call an elected official. Protest the atrocity of separating children from their parents. Whatever you do this week, don't let this birthday go unnoticed.

If this sounds like an exaggerated plea from a person who drank too much Kool-Aid at the United Nations party, consider these facts:

1. The UDHR, adopted by the U.N. General Assembly on Dec. 10, 1948, grew directly out of the dark soil of the horrors of World War II.

The mass murder we know as the Holocaust, combined with the countless evils done in the name of war, led the world powers to create the United Nations.

It was quickly realized that the U.N. charter needed to be complimented with a legal framework to guarantee the rights of every person.

The right response to the global experience in the early 1940s - after the grief - is the sentiment, "Never again." The UDHR is a worldwide legal shout (now translated into 500 languages): "Never again!"

2. The UDHR has global authority.

By its resolution 217 A (III), the General Assembly, meeting in Paris, adopted it with eight nations abstaining from the vote but none dissenting.

Since 1948, one of the three pillars of the U.N. has been that of human rights as expressed in the Universal Declaration (the other two pillars are peace/security and social/economic development). The UDHR is the foundation of international human rights law.

3. The declaration expresses what all goodwill people of faith truly believe, and particularly what people who profess to follow the teaching of Jesus ought to believe: We should treat others the way we want to be treated.

The heart of the UDHR is the golden rule. Take for example Article 1: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

Even recognizing that the last word by itself sounds a bit sexist today, we all believe this to be true. At least, we believe it to be true about ourselves.

It's easy to believe it for people in our inner circles. The question comes, "Are we willing to follow the example of Jesus who taught us to ever expand our circle of empathy to those we've considered 'the other'?"

4. The UDHR is desperately needed as a means to the expansion of rights in places of oppression.

Take, for example, the issue of the freedom of religion or belief. Article 18 states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right

includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

This fundamental right is restricted by far too many governments, and in some cases (currently in Myanmar and Xinjiang, China) an unholy mix of ethnic and religious hatred undergirds atrocities against religious minorities.

5. The Universal Declaration addresses the needs of vulnerable people around the globe.

From the right to seek asylum (Article 14), to the right to a free education at the elementary level (Article 26), to the right of the young to refuse marriage (Article 16), rights are covered that intend to protect the powerless from the powerful.

If we take the words of Jesus seriously at all, the words of Luke 4 (lift up those who are downtrodden) and Matthew 25 (do unto the least of these) compel us to see the UDHR as a legal tool to enforce a moral imperative.

6. We need to celebrate, recognize and uplift the UDHR because, like the rest of us who have a birthday, it's still developing.

I don't mean the document itself is changing, but I mean that the principles and practices that come from it are either in growth or decay.

More than two centuries ago, a group of American revolutionaries affirmed that “all men are created equal” while disregarding the fact that men of color and all women were not in their vision of “all.” It has taken two centuries and a civil war for all to begin to be “all.”

However, the moral arc that is bending toward justice is doing so partly because we are living into the aspiration expressed in the Constitution.

The UDHR, like the United States Constitution, can be a living document that codifies a reality we all want to be living into.

We are, as is often said these days, at a unique point in human history. Authoritarianism seems to be ascendant, the global threat of climate change underplayed, economic disparities growing, the population of the “stateless” refugee rising.

A 70-year-old document, no matter how universal, isn’t going to fix our global mess.

However, it is a very important tool in our toolbox. It is a legal lever to lift the downtrodden. It is a candle to light in our dark world.

And speaking of candles, let’s light 70 of them and advance the global golden rule in a grand celebration standing up for the rights of others.

Editor’s note: This article is part of series this week commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Previous articles in the series are:

[*The UN Declaration of Human Rights and Christian Faith - Part 1*](#) by David P. Gushee

[*The UN Declaration of Human Rights and Christian Faith - Part 2*](#) by David P. Gushee