

# Baptists Have Mixed Record on Defending Human Rights

In an [interview](#) with EthicsDaily.com in 2012, the late and much respected Baptist scholar, Glen Stassen, said, “The first comprehensive doctrine of human rights in history was written by a Baptist, Richard Overton. He was part of the [John] Smyth group that joined the Waterlander Mennonite Church.

“He was influenced, of course, by the original Baptist push for religious liberty,” Stassen explained, “but then it became freedom of the press ... justice for the poor ... the right to vote regardless of your religion. ... It’s our baby. We need to defend human rights. The struggle for human rights is our Baptist struggle.”

But as we commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([UDHR](#)), adopted in 1948, can we say that Stassen’s assertion about Baptists has been really true of us?

Or is his reminder of a little-known part of our early history a challenge to encourage a necessary corrective to our contemporary thinking and action?

Much better known are the famous words of the early Baptist leader, Thomas Helwys, who in 1612 was the first to argue (in the English language, at least) for religious freedom for all, including Jews, Muslims and those he termed “heretics.”

And this was at a time when to proclaim this amounted to sedition against the “divinely appointed” English king, who was intent on forcing religious conformity on his subjects.

Since then, Baptists have tended to interpret any concept of human rights by using the touchstone of religious freedom.

So, perhaps it’s is not surprising that when the San Francisco Conference to draft the Charter of the United Nations was called, J.M. Dawson, the chairperson of the

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Baptist Joint Committee in the U.S., went there with a particular mandate.

As he later wrote, “To that meeting I carried a hundred thousand petitions from Baptists, North and South, white and Negroes, asking that the Charter to be adopted would include guarantee of full religious liberty for every human being.”

In this, the Baptists were disappointed, but of course the later drafting of Article 18 of the UDHR on religious freedom for all, brought the vision of Helwys into the context of 20th century post-war concerns about establishing universal human rights.

As Baptists, we no doubt want to ground our concern for both human rights and religious freedom in a vision of the sovereignty of God, the rule of Christ and the God-given dignity of every human being.

Yet, there remains the challenge for us as to how that part of our DNA that is religious freedom for all belongs in a wider commitment to human rights as a whole.

The tradition that Stassen refers to, of Overton working out the wider implications of Helwys’ vision to include what may be the first draft of a Bill of Rights in English, has always been a strand in Baptist life, though perhaps not a dominant one.

It remains true that some Baptists were at the forefront of ending slavery in both England and the U.S. (though, as is well known, other Baptists tried for a time to justify it on biblical grounds).

And in the example of Martin Luther King Jr., the 50th anniversary of whose assassination we also mark this year, we have a Baptist who drew heavily on the teachings of the Old Testament prophets and of Jesus himself, as well as the nonviolent teachings of Ghandi in the struggle for civil rights, which later in his life widened to the defense of human rights as a whole.

But we must also admit that Baptists tend to be vulnerable to the danger of being

so grateful for their religious freedom that, in effect, they enter into a pact with the powers that be, which prevents them from becoming involved in defending human rights as a whole.

Perhaps the most telling 20th century example is that of the Baptists in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s.

They were granted more freedom than ever before to evangelize openly, but in return they were expected to keep silent about the fate of the Jews or the other dreadful abuses of human rights and dignity taking place in Germany.

And, as is well documented by both British and German Baptist historians, that is exactly what happened throughout the whole Nazi period.

In 1984 at a European Baptist Congress, German Baptists referred to this period in their history and confessed themselves to be “humbled by having been subordinated often to the ideological seduction of that time, in not having shown greater courage in acknowledging truth and justice. We pray to God that we may learn from this part of our history, so that we may be more alert to the ideological temptations of our day.”

Do those words of confession not need to be on the lips of Baptists in some situations today in regard to standing for truth and justice?

So, honesty compels us to admit that Baptists have had a mixed record of defending human rights as a whole.

Stassen’s assertion that “the struggle for human rights is our Baptist struggle” has yet to be fully realized among us.

*Editor’s note: This article is part of a 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.

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

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