

Scripturally Annotated Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Biblical Texts Promoting Human Rights

THE
CARTER CENTER



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Introduction

On Dec. 10, 1948, the U.N. General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), proclaiming inalienable rights to which all human beings are inherently entitled, regardless of race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status. The Carter Center hails this year's 70th anniversary of the UDHR as an opportunity for all to reaffirm the universal values and enduring principles enshrined in the UDHR.

The Carter Center works to support former U.S. President Jimmy Carter's long commitment to human rights, particularly the rights of women and girls. In his 2014 book, *A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence, and Power*, President Carter articulates many of his proposals, including the engagement of religious leaders in this work, because, as he argues, the disproportionate violence, poverty, and discrimination that women and girls around the world face is often caused by "the false interpretation of carefully selected religious texts and a growing tolerance of violence and warfare."

To mark of the 70th anniversary of the UDHR, The Carter Center, in collaboration with partners, seeks to highlight the connection between ancient religious texts – in this case the Bible – and the contemporary articulation of human rights found in the UDHR. To that end, this document hopes to inspire thought on the relationship between Christianity and its support for the human rights found in the UDHR.

In this document, each UDHR article is accompanied by New Revised Standard Version biblical text, with a brief commentary bridging the two. This document's modest objective is to *initiate* discussion on matters of biblical interpretation and human rights. It does not attempt to provide a determinate statement or in-depth scholarly explanations. There are many differences in the interpretation of biblical passages related to particular human rights, and this document in no way means to be a definitive assessment of how biblical texts do or do not align with the obligations enumerated in the UDHR. It is, however, intended to provide Christian validation and confirmation of the basic values and principles that the UDHR espouses.

Both the UDHR and the Bible were written in the language of their eras, with the generalized use of male pronouns. Time continues to demonstrate the power of language and the importance of using language that is reflective of the present day. To ensure inclusivity, this document employs gender-inclusive language in its commentary.

It is our hope that this document will provoke thought and generate fruitful deliberation, reconsideration, debate, and dialogue. We hope, too, that this deliberation, reconsideration, and dialogue will contribute to a more just, peaceful, and compassionate society for all.

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.

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

(Genesis 1:26-27)

In biblical terms, the moral status of human beings is exalted, in large part due to the declaration first made in Genesis 1 that human beings are made in the divine image. Being made in God's image has been interpreted in a variety of ways. One pattern of interpretation emphasizes certain God-like human capacities, such as moral freedom, reason, conscience, and love. Another interpretive approach emphasizes the elevated moral status that goes with being made in God's image, such as an intrinsic, or God-given, dignity. Finally, the fact that Genesis 1 applies the divine image to everyone speaks to a fundamental human equality – no one has more of God's image than anyone else.

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

(Galatians 5:13-14)

Freedom, equality, and dignity are bestowed on all by virtue of being human, made in the image of God. In Galatians, the Apostle Paul reminds us that these rights are not earned but divinely ordained. Paul's understanding of freedom is not individualized license but the freedom to love and serve God and others. Paul's use of the term "slave" does not mean that we are literally to enslave others or to become enslaved by others. Slavery here is a metaphor for a radical commitment to love and serve one another in community. Furthermore, the warning against "self-indulgence" should not be understood as removal of the benefits of God's compassion or denial of the more fundamental assertion that everyone, even the sinner, deserves equal respect. Hence, all are instructed to "love your neighbor as yourself." Ultimately, the reason we are called to care about human rights is because of God's love for all human beings and our human obligation to love others.



(1) Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. (2) Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

You shall not follow a majority in wrongdoing; when you bear witness in a lawsuit, you shall not side with the majority so as to pervert justice; nor shall you be partial to the poor in a lawsuit.

When you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back.

When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free.

You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in their lawsuits. Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and those in the right, for I will not acquit the guilty. You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.

You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

(Exodus 23:2-9)

In Exodus 23, the Israelites are given instructions on how to maintain justice for all. This text lists acts that must be and not be done, so as to prepare a safe and equitable space for all who inhabit the land. Note how this text aims at nurturing a community in which people will act justly, even when it is not in accordance with their preferences or narrow self-interest. Exodus 23, therefore, ensures that everyone is equally entitled to the rights set forth by the law, just as UDHR Article 2 guarantees everyone's entitlement to the rights and freedoms set forth in the UDHR without discrimination.

[F]or in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

(Galatians 3:26-28)

These words of the Apostle Paul express so powerfully the equality and unity of all people in Christ, which can be understood to extend to all human beings regardless of faith. There are no distinctions between human beings that could ever make any group of higher value than any other. Race and ethnicity; wealth, class, and status; gender and gender expression — none of these aspects that make us different from one another affects either our equality before God or our entitlement to all rights and freedoms set out in the UDHR.



Everyone has the right to life,
liberty and security of person.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”
(Luke 4:16-19)*

In this passage, Jesus has returned to Galilee to begin ministry in his hometown of Nazareth. As Jesus is filled with the power of the Spirit, he begins to read the prophecy of Isaiah 61. Through this text, Jesus announces his ministry as led by “The Spirit of the Lord” and directed to the poor, the captives, and the oppressed – with a message of liberation for all. Jesus’ mission was deeply concerned with the affirmation of the life, liberty, and security of the oppressed. Jesus, and the Hebrew Bible before him, emphasized the rights and needs of the most oppressed, not because they matter more than other people, but because they are the least able to protect themselves from injustice, and their treatment, therefore, serves as a barometer for the broader application and attainment of justice. As followers of Christ, we must, accordingly, concern ourselves with the protection of the rights of all, so that every person may live life in its fullness.



ARTICLE 4

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)

It must be admitted that the Bible contains numerous passages in which slavery is accepted, its rules legislated, and slave obedience mandated. These texts had the unfortunate effect of providing fodder for the defense of slavery.

However, it came to be understood that there was another way, a better way, to interpret the Bible when it came to slavery. What matters is not stories, laws, and teachings that accept and legislate slavery, but the deeper spirit of the Bible that emphasizes human dignity in the image of God, human equality before God, and love of neighbor (all neighbors) as enjoined and modeled by Jesus Christ.

UDHR Article 4 affirms that all human beings are equal and of infinite value. Every human being is made in the image of God, and that sacred image should never be defiled by slavery or servitude. Christ died to set all humans free from slavery of every kind – physical slavery to other persons and spiritual slavery to beliefs that deny the love, power, and goodness of God.



ARTICLE 5

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Now the men who were holding Jesus began to mock him and beat him; they also blindfolded him and kept asking him, "Prophesy! Who is it that struck you?" They kept heaping many other insults on him.

(Luke 22:63-65)

Jesus was tortured. This is easy to miss if the Passion Narratives are not read with attention to the issue of torture. In fact, the lengthy trial narratives of the four Gospel accounts are extremely valuable, albeit painful, accounts of torture and other abuses. Jesus was struck, spat upon, beaten, flogged, mocked, and finally plaited with a crown of thorns. Crucifixion itself was torture-execution, a slow, public mockery of a death intended to inflict the maximum emotional and physical suffering on the victim. Torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment was, is, and always will be a grave offense against human dignity and rights.



Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

*So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*
(Genesis 1:27)



Recognition of personhood is a corollary of recognition of human dignity and the image of God. Personhood is thus a reflection of divinity, and it is equally shared across the human family. Though particularities of identity diversify us, we are all equal in creation. This is the basis for common human dignity and respect. Particularities of identity, such as class, race, and gender, both enrich personhood and are not erased in our common humanity. Just as our particularity does not alter God's grace toward us, neither should it negatively impact our treatment of one another or who is recognized as a legal person. UDHR Article 6 affirms that there is no human being who does not possess rights and recognition before the law.

*Up to this point they listened to [Paul], but then they shouted, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live." And while they were shouting, throwing off their cloaks, and tossing dust into the air, the tribune directed that he was to be brought into the barracks, and ordered him to be examined by flogging, to find out the reason for this outcry against him. But when they had tied him up with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who is uncondemned?" When the centurion heard that, he went to the tribune and said to him, "What are you about to do? This man is a Roman citizen." The tribune came and asked Paul, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" And he said, "Yes."
(Acts 22:22-27)*

This text from Acts is a valuable window into precisely how important it is that every person, everywhere, be recognized before the law. Paul has enraged a crowd in Jerusalem and is about to be tortured under Roman authority. But, just in time, he invokes his citizenship, which protects him from that imminent flogging. UDHR Article 6, however, demands that each person be recognized as a person before the law everywhere, regardless of any consideration, including citizenship status.

All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?... You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

(James 2:1-4; 8-10)

This is an excerpt of a letter written by the Apostle James, probably to Palestinian Jewish Christians. Among other admonitions, James warns against partiality or differential treatment based on economic status. James' intent is to show that, in order to "fulfill the royal law," you must "love your neighbor as yourself," regardless of how much money they have.

Mirroring this passage, UDHR Article 7 says that the law is the same for everyone and should be applied in the same way to all. In no way should we discriminate on the basis of distinctions such as race, color, sex, language, or religion. It is imperative to ensure that all receive equal protection of the law.



Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

*God has taken his place in the divine council;
in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:
“How long will you judge unjustly
and show partiality to the wicked?
Selah
Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”
They have neither knowledge nor understanding,
they walk around in darkness;
all the foundations of the earth are shaken.
I say, “You are gods,
children of the Most High, all of you;
nevertheless, you shall die like mortals,
and fall like any prince.”
Rise up, O God, judge the earth;
for all the nations belong to you!
(Psalm 82)*

Justice in judgment is a central demand of the Hebrew Bible. Leaders are called to dispense justice always, with special concern for the oppressed and defenseless. This passage promises/threatens divine judgment against leaders who do not do justice. UDHR Article 8 sets the standard that states must provide sound structures that provide effective remedies for violations of fundamental rights.



No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, “Why did you not arrest him?” The police answered, “Never has anyone spoken like this!” Then the Pharisees replied, “Surely you have

not been deceived too, have you? Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, which does not know the law – they are accursed.” Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and

who was one of them, asked, “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” They replied, “Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.”

(John 7:45-52)

In John 7, the Pharisees wanted guards to arrest Jesus during the Festival of Booths. However, the guards did not arrest Jesus, finding no fault in him at the time. When the Pharisees grew indignant, Nicodemus asked, “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” Nicodemus and the guards tried to highlight the basic legal principle that there must be a legitimate reason to arrest or detain someone for any period of time. UDHR Article 9 affirms that no arrest, detention, or exile may be arbitrary.



ARTICLE 10

Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

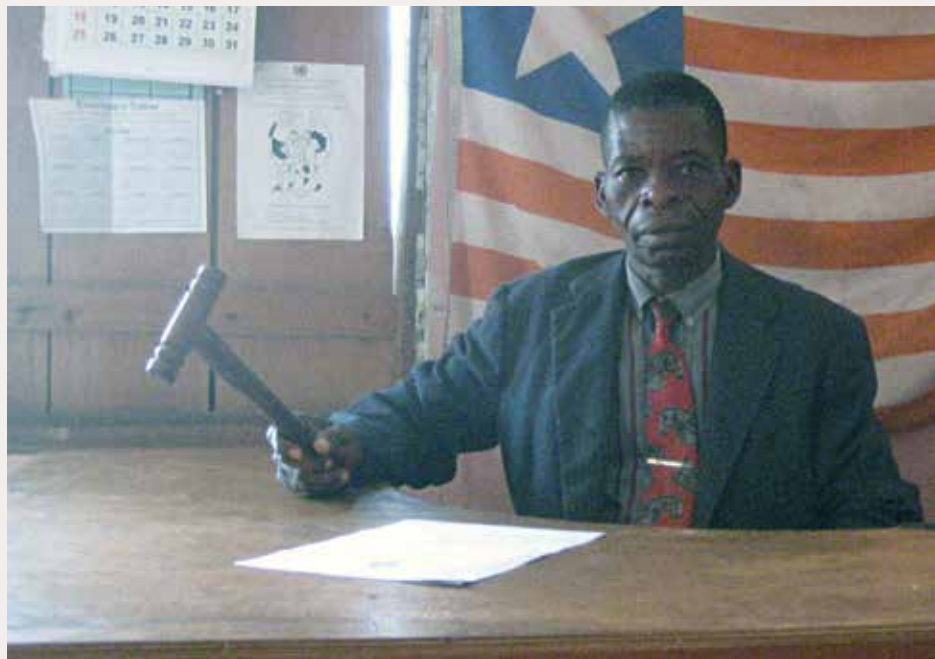
Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"
(Luke 18:1-8)

This profound passage is commonly referred to as "The Parable of the Persistent Widow." The widow is seeking justice against an opponent who she believes is harming her unjustly and in violation of Jewish law.

The motives of the unjust judge are not fully specified. Even if he is simply lazy and uncaring, he is not fulfilling his responsibilities before God and his community. Yet the widow is persistent and continues to plead for a hearing. Her persistence eventually pays off, and her request is granted.

The unjust judge in this parable represents indifferent, or even abusive, power in a society that does not value the full humanity of women. Such indifference, particularly with respect to women and societal attitudes expressed toward them, perpetuates violence and other forms of exploitation. Jesus, however, suggests that God is the antithesis of this unjust judge. God is a God of justice, and God will vindicate the oppressed, regardless of gender.

Article 10 affirms that everyone — without regard to gender, race, or other unique characteristic — is entitled to a fair and just judicial process.



(1) Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defense. (2) No one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.

So I took the leaders of your tribes, wise and reputable individuals, and installed them as leaders over you, commanders of thousands, commanders of hundreds, commanders of fifties, commanders of tens, and officials, throughout your tribes. I charged your judges at that time: "Give the members of your community a fair hearing, and judge rightly between one person and another, whether citizen or resident alien. You must not be partial in judging: hear out the small and the great alike; you shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God's. Any case that is too hard for you, bring to me, and I will hear it." So I charged you at that time with all the things that you should do.

(Deuteronomy 1:15-18)

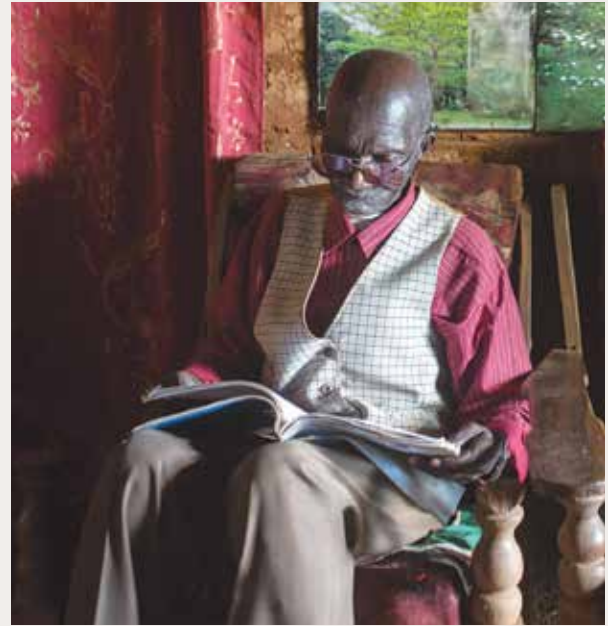
Here, Moses is speaking to the tribes of Israel. At that time, Israel had grown in number and become so large that it was not feasible for Moses to handle all its disputes. God had Moses establish a council of tribal leaders to which community members could bring grievances. God's instruction through Moses to the tribal leaders also serves as instruction for leaders today. The rules are simple: 1) Give everyone a fair hearing; 2) Judge justly – whether citizen or non-citizen; and 3) Show no partiality, but listen to the whole story. UDHR Article 11 guarantees the fundamental, minimum requirements for a fair trial: the presumption of innocence, the necessity of a public trial, the opportunity to offer an effective defense, and the application only of laws and penalties that existed at the time the offense was committed.



ARTICLE 12

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honor and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

*Give ear to my words, O Lord;
give heed to my sighing.
Listen to the sound of my cry,
my King and my God, for to you I pray.
O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice;
in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch.
For you are not a God who delights in wickedness;
evil will not sojourn with you.
The boastful will not stand before your eyes;
you hate all evildoers.
You destroy those who speak lies;
the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful.
But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love,
will enter your house,
I will bow down toward your holy temple
in awe of you.
Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies;
make your way straight before me.
For there is no truth in their mouths;
their hearts are destruction;
their throats are open graves;
they flatter with their tongues.
Make them bear their guilt, O God;
let them fall by their own counsels;*



*because of their many transgressions cast them out,
for they have rebelled against you.
But let all who take refuge in you rejoice;
let them ever sing for joy.
Spread your protection over them,
so that those who love your name may exult in you.
For you bless the righteous, O Lord;
you cover them with favor as with a shield.
(Psalm 5)*

Article 12 of the UDHR specifies that prohibited forms of attack are not limited to attacks on the physical integrity of the person, such as the prohibition against torture found in Article 5. Prohibited attacks against the person also include arbitrary interference with a person's privacy, family, home, and correspondence, as well as attacks on reputation and honor.

We see many cases of this type of mistreatment described throughout the Hebrew Bible. There are many songs of lament, like Psalm 5, that describe the ways in which people are attacked in such areas of personal vulnerability.

As seen in the psalmist's lament, God is always present to hear the cries of those who are treated maliciously. The psalmist asks for protection in

writing, "Give ear to my words, O Lord... O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch." In the end, the psalmist bears witness to God's protection, writing, "For you bless the righteous, O Lord; you cover them with favor as with a shield." All people should act to protect from unjust assault the honor, privacy, and reputation of their neighbors.



ARTICLE 13

(1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each State. (2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

(Genesis 12:1-3)

There are many passages in the Bible that point to examples of individuals and families leaving their countries, often under the perceived command of God. In this passage, we find that Abraham (Abram) was told to leave his native land for another land God intended to show him. Abraham exercised what UDHR Article 13 describes as a "right to freedom of movement" and the "right to leave any country." Biblical teachings are easily read to go further – to call for compassion, and to create a demand for hospitality as an aspect of neighborly love.



ARTICLE 14

(1) Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution. (2) This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien.

The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

(Leviticus 19:33-34)

The strongest biblical mandates for caring for refugees and asylum seekers are passages in the Mosaic Law. The crucial point the Hebrew Bible passages convey is that God commands God's people to receive into their lands those who are displaced, because they were once displaced people who received God's mercy. This urges us to do unto others as our gracious God did unto us.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

(Hebrews 13:2)

Throughout the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament scriptures, there are constant calls for hospitality. God provided hospitality to those in exile. Jesus (who was also a refugee) calls for hospitality to those in need. As vulnerable people who have been cared for by God, believers are called to care for others. The idea that a person would find security and then turn her or his back on those in need goes against scriptural teaching.



ARTICLE
15

(1) Everyone has the right to a nationality. (2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law."

But Ruth said,

*"Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!*

Where you go, I will go;

*where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.*

*Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.*

*May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!"*

*When Naomi saw that she was
determined to go with her, she said no
more to her.*

(Ruth 1:15-18)

The story of Ruth and Naomi is an interesting account of religious and national identity. Naomi, her husband, and two sons — all citizens of Bethlehem — moved to Moab to escape the famine in their homeland. Shortly after arriving in Moab, Naomi's husband died, and her two sons married Moabite women, one of whom was Ruth. Naomi's two sons also died, but rather than finding another husband, Ruth chose to remain with Naomi and to leave her homeland to go to Bethlehem with Naomi. Ruth tells Naomi, "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God." As Ruth and Naomi traveled across borders, their stories give witness to what UDHR Article 15 names as the right to change one's nationality. Importantly, Article 15 also recognizes the right not to be arbitrarily deprived of one's nationality.



(1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution. (2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses. (3) The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

They said, "We will call the girl, and ask her." And they called Rebekah, and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" She said, "I will." So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his men. And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, "May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes."

Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man; thus, the servant took Rebekah, and went his way.

Now Isaac had come from Beer-lahai-roi, and was settled in the Negeb. Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field; and looking up, he saw camels coming. And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, and said to the servant, "Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us?" The servant said, "It is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

(Genesis 24:57-67)



The story of Isaac and Rebekah tells of two people of full age who marry and build a family founded on the free and full consent of both. Even though Abraham's servant identified Rebekah as a suitable bride for Isaac, Rebekah's family asked her to decide whether she wanted to go: "Will you go with this man?" She said, "I will." This ancient biblical marriage account emphasizes mutual consent and love as central to marriage, and marriage as a context of mutual belonging and comfort.

UDHR Article 16 makes clear the equal rights of men and women to marry and in marriage. Article 16 also recognizes the importance of the family unit and the duty of society and the state to honor and protect it.

(1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others. (2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

Later the following events took place: Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. And Ahab said to Naboth, "Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money." But Naboth said to Ahab, "The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance." Ahab went home resentful and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him; for he had said, "I will not give you my ancestral inheritance." He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat.

(1 Kings 21:1-4)

Later in this passage, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel arrange to have Naboth killed for refusing to sell his land. After Naboth was stoned to death and his property seized, the prophet Elijah was sent by God to confront Ahab about his acts of injustice and greed. This story points to a system of respect for property rights that even royalty must honor. The commandment is clear; the sacred dignity of each person includes respect for his or her property.

Now the whole group who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

(Acts 4:32-35)

Students of the New Testament know of two passages in the Book of Acts that describe voluntary economic sharing in the early Christian Church. This is one of them. The import of this passage is that voluntary economic sharing of what one has is, or can be, a powerful aspect of Christian character and community. Such disposition can overcome divisions based on wealth, class, and economic status, while meeting the needs of the poor. Article 17 ensures that everyone has the right to own property, to do with it as they will, and the right not be arbitrarily deprived of it.



ARTICLE 18

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.

John answered, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us." But Jesus said to him, "Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you."

(Luke 9:49-50)

Luke's gospel records this story of Jesus instructing his disciples to be open to others who are invoking his name to do works of healing. Jesus says, "[W]hoever is not against you is for you." In saying this, Jesus gives witness to a deep spirit of tolerance that can help us work in respectful cooperation with others of different faith backgrounds. UDHR Article 18 affirms that freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the right to express and change them, are basic human rights.



ARTICLE 19

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.... Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

(Ephesians 4:25-27; 29-32)



In this text from the letter to the Ephesians, free speech and expression are supported. For believers, free speech is a moral issue, in the sense that what we do with our words should be considered carefully and in the context of their effects on other people: We are free to speak, but not to lie; we are free to express anger, but obligated to seek reconciliation; we are free to talk, but not to slander one another. We are to use our words to build up, offer grace, and advance kindness.

UDHR Article 19 sets the standard that freedom of thought includes the freedom to hold and to express opinions “without interference,” as well as to share ideas through any media and with other people, even across national borders. Article 29 of the UDHR explains that exercise of all rights in the UDHR may be limited to ensure respect for the rights of others. For example, certain states set some broad outer limits on public speech, as exhibited by libel laws, which can be seen as the intersection of the right of freedom of expression and the right to be free from attacks on one’s “honor and reputation” found in UDHR Article 12. The text from Ephesians serves as a reminder that the best way to avoid entering that painful intersection is to choose to discipline one’s speech with the spirit of love.

ARTICLE 20

(1) Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. (2) No one may be compelled to an association.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

(Acts 2:43-47)

The story of Pentecost in Acts 2 presents the foundational story of the free assembly and association of new believers in the early church. People of all backgrounds gathered in a place set apart to experience together the Spirit of God “like the rush of a violent wind” (Acts 2:2). Verses 46 and 47 show how these early believers continued to gather “day by day” in freedom for “praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.” In the gospels of the New Testament, Jesus proclaims a new order that is about liberation and freedom from oppression of all kinds. It is clear from this broader perspective that God deeply desires freedom for all peoples, and that this freedom certainly includes the rights to freely assemble and associate. Every aspect of civil society, including religious life, depends on these freedoms.



ARTICLE 21

(1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. (2) Everyone has the right to equal access to public service in his country. (3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

At that time I said to you, "I am unable by myself to bear you. The Lord your God has multiplied you, so that today you are as numerous as the stars of heaven. May the Lord, the God of your ancestors, increase you a thousand times more and bless you, as he has promised you! But how can I bear the heavy burden of your disputes all by myself? Choose for each of your tribes individuals who are wise, discerning, and reputable to be your leaders."

(Deuteronomy 1:9-13)



Here in Deuteronomy, we see the formation of tribal leaders. Members of the 12 tribes of Israel were selected by the people to assume the role of a public servant in hearing the various disputes within their tribe. We witness in this text a decentralization of political power from Moses to tribal leaders selected by a process within the tribes themselves. Scripture, in general, plants the seeds of the later development of democracy through a number of its core ideas, including equal human dignity, the rule of law, and human rights.

UDHR Article 21 enshrines the right to a representative self-government as a fundamental human right. Article 21 recognizes that we all – regardless of gender – have the right to partake in political affairs. Whether by becoming a public servant or voting one into office, all are equally granted the right to play an active role in one's country's political process.

God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

(Genesis 1:28-31)

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.



This passage in Genesis comes from the very first chapter and book of the Bible, in which God creates the first humans. In this passage, God grants humans dominion. Dominion can be misunderstood as raw power over something, which can be taken to mean supreme, dominant, unaccountable rule. Here in Genesis 1, dominion is instead best understood as responsible exercise of divinely delegated power on behalf of other creatures and the creation itself. The purpose of this dominion can be broadly viewed as enabling all creatures to flourish, to become fully what God intended them to be.

UDHR Article 22 outlines how society has a similar responsibility, within its means, to its members so each may flourish through provision of social security and realization of economic, social, and cultural rights. Genesis 1 and UDHR Article 22 remind us that power, including government power, is for service to others.



After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid.

(Luke 10: 1-7)

- (1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
- (2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
- (3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.
- (4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

From the very beginning, the scriptures are filled with references about the dignity of work and the importance of a just wage. Part of what it is to be made in God's image includes our vocation to work not just for bread, but for meaning. This passage from Luke shows Jesus putting his disciples to work as missionaries and clearly states that, as laborers, they deserve to be adequately remunerated, though in this case it would be through hospitality.

UDHR 23 emphasizes that people have the right to choose their work rather than have their employment commanded. They deserve decent conditions of work, equal pay for equal work (thus no discrimination), a decent, living wage, and the right to organize and form trade unions.





ARTICLE 24

Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

(Genesis 2:1-3)

The Hebrew scriptures, in the very first book, Genesis, set out the story of creation, which culminates in the fact of divine Sabbath rest. Hebrew Law contains numerous commands to honor Sabbath, beginning in the Decalogue and including case law. Jewish tradition has, even to this day, constantly emphasized the significance of Sabbath observance. The Christian scriptures are replete with the simple notation that Jesus went off to pray and keep the Sabbath, though he also disputed an approach to Sabbath that made no space for exceptions for healing. Rest and leisure offer a time when we can connect with others, realize that we are dependent beings not fully in control of our lives and environment, and build up relationships with our families and communities.

UDHR Article 24 speaks of a right to rest and leisure, with a view to protecting workers' rights. No work day should be too long and periodic paid holidays should be available, so all may exercise this right.



(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. (2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

(Luke 10:29-34)



This story of the Good Samaritan outlines the basic call to care for our neighbors. Jesus says that the Samaritan (an outcast in Judaism at the time) took the man who had been attacked by the side of the road and took extravagant effort to ensure that he was housed, fed, and received healthcare.

UDHR Article 25, in a sense, extends the compassion evidenced by the Good Samaritan and posits a set of basic rights around human well-being: food, clothes, housing, health care, social security. The special needs of mothers and children (note the specific concern for children born out of wedlock) receive special focus here, as also in the Bible. Each person and family is entitled to the basics of life, with special attention to times and cases of special vulnerability, so that each can live in dignity.

ARTICLE 26

(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. (2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendships among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace. (3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

(Luke 2:43-47)

This passage tells the fascinating story of how Jesus' parents found him in the temple when he was a 12-year-old boy. It is interesting that the only story we have from Jesus' childhood is this account of his earnest desire to sit in the temple and participate in the intellectual/religious education that existed at the pinnacle of his tradition.

UDHR Article 26 is rooted in the recognition that no human being can flourish apart from a quality education. It provides a right and even a duty to receive at least elementary education and calls for higher-level education to be available and accessible. Education should broadly develop the human personality and promote the kinds of rights articulated in the UDHR. While Article 26 recognizes the right of parents to choose their children's kind of education, no one, not even a parent, has the right to deprive children of an education.



(1) Everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits. (2) Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

The Lord said to Moses: Tell the Israelites to take for me an offering; from all whose hearts prompt them to give you shall receive the offering for me. This is the offering that you shall receive from them: gold, silver, and bronze, blue, purple, and crimson yarns and fine linen, goats' hair, tanned rams' skins, fine leather, acacia wood, oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and for the breastpiece. And have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them. In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.

(Exodus 25:1-9)

In this passage, God gives Moses instructions as to how the people of Israel should build a tabernacle (i.e., a tent for public worship). Men and women both play important roles in this construction project; Moses commands them to make an offering of building materials – “all whose hearts prompt them.” Later, the text says that “everyone whose heart was stirred to come to do the work” (Exodus 36:2) participated.

These passages also emphasize the beauty and artistry of the tabernacle. So also, tabernacle construction impacted the cultural life of the whole community; all Israel benefited from its construction and its presence in the middle of their camp. This scripture thus suggests the right for all individuals to freely participate in the cultural life and to enjoy its benefits, which is the central theme of UDHR Article 27.

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

(Mark 5:25-34)



The woman with a hemorrhage has spent 12 years, because of her condition, unable to participate in the life of her community in any way – no worship, no cultural activities – because she was considered unclean. Her sneaking out to touch the hem of Jesus' garment was risky; at the time it was believed that she made him and the whole crowd unclean just by being among them. Jesus' healing restores her to full participation in her world, the full participation that the UDHR insists upon for every person in every circumstance.

ARTICLE 28

Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

*For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.
I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress.
No more shall there be in it
an infant that lives but a few days
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.
They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—
and their descendants as well.
Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
says the Lord.*

(Isaiah 65:17-25)





Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

*“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”
(Revelation 21:1-4)*

As this is a summative article of the UDHR that speaks to a climate of human thriving in which the rights and freedoms of the entire UDHR can be fully realized, it calls for scriptural support that speaks to God’s overarching purposes of redemption and well-being for all of creation.

Texts that support this vision can be found in the prophecies of Isaiah. In Isaiah 43:19 the prophet declares: “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”

Texts such as this offer a vision that God’s purpose for creation is wholeness and restoration. In Isaiah 65:17, the prophet declares God’s purposes for restoration and renewal of all creation: “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.”

Later in that same text, the prophet says that this new creation is intended by God to be a place of human thriving, social unity, and ecological harmony: “They will not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; . . . The wolf and the lamb shall feed together . . . They shall not harm or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.”

Given the current turmoil in many places of the world, one sees that much work remains.

John proclaims that God is creating a new heaven and a new earth, a reference to Isaiah 65:17. The social and international order envisaged by the UDHR is a secular way of supporting God’s new realm of salvation, justice, mercy, and peace.

ARTICLE 29

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

(Micah 6:8)

(1) Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible. (2) In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society. (3) These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

UDHR Article 29 introduces a note of individual duty, and not just rights, in community. The full development of the person depends on healthy, rights-honoring communities. This article calls people to recognize that we are all interconnected and that we are obligated to remember that how we act as individuals and nations impacts the well-being of others. Article 29 recognizes that limitations may be placed on rights solely for two purposes: 1) to ensure equal exercise of these rights by all; and 2) to ensure morality, public order, and the general welfare of society. Any such limitations must be enshrined in law.

The Bible is also communal and instructs us to co-create a just, righteous, and peace-filled world – without which individual rights and freedoms cannot be exercised. Micah tells us that justice is an urgent action, not a state of being. To do justice is to look at how political and religious institutions work and make changes where there are shortfalls. This biblical reference emphasizes the duties and responsibilities of all people and nations to create, with God, a world of peace and justice.



ARTICLE 30

Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.

*My child, if you accept my words
and treasure up my commandments within you,
making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding;
if you indeed cry out for insight,
and raise your voice for understanding;
if you seek it like silver,
and search for it as for hidden treasures—
then you will understand the fear of the Lord
and find the knowledge of God.
For the Lord gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;
he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly,
guarding the paths of justice
and preserving the way of his faithful ones.
Then you will understand righteousness and justice
and equity, every good path;
for wisdom will come into your heart,
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;
prudence will watch over you;
and understanding will guard you.
(Proverbs 2:1-11)*

Article 30 declares that no entity or person should act to destroy any of the rights listed in the UDHR and no language in the UDHR should be understood as permitting anyone to do so.

The wisdom literature of Proverbs 2 shares that “if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you,” the Lord will respond in giving wisdom and guarding the paths of justice.



Though the UDHR is a nonsectarian document, Christians and other believers can find many points of contact. The UDHR reflects millennia of developing human wisdom and hard recent experience of the desecration of human beings and denial of the most basic human rights.

Persons of many religious faiths and no faith have embraced the UDHR because they see the truth of its claims and

the wisdom of its aspirations. The UDHR resonates with Christians because of the striking correlations between the human rights it declares and the deepest principles and themes of the Bible.



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