

The Agra Covenant on Christian Capital

This covenant is perhaps best introduced in the words of its authors themselves (Ronald J. Sider, Vinay Samuel, David Bussau, Moss Ntlha, Ruth Callanta, and Tito Paredes):

“The first draft of this covenant was written at Agra, but the rush of the final sessions did not provide opportunity for it to be discussed. Since Agra, we have corresponded by fax to produce this final version. We all believe it captures a part of our common concerns at Agra and also that it could become an instrument for encouraging many people around the world to renewed efforts to empower the poor.”

Please note that the authors welcome all to join in endorsing this covenant (see the note at the end for details) and that, to quote the authors again, “we also warmly encourage everyone to use the covenant in your own country or region as it seems appropriate and helpful.” —The Editors

As biblical Christians gathered at Agra, India, from six continents to evaluate the market economy, we felt compelled to invite Christians everywhere to covenant with us—to join the battle to end the scandal of desperate poverty in the midst of expanding abundance. While expanding market economies create increasing material abundance for some, one fifth of the world’s people lack the capital to participate. Day after day, probably at least one billion members of God’s one human family lack even the minimal necessities of food and shelter.

The God revealed in the scriptures weeps. Everywhere the Bible tells us of God’s special concern for the poor. One major criterion God uses to measure societies is what they do to the “least of these.” Therefore, we too must evaluate today’s economies by whether they empower the poorest to participate, work, and enjoy dignified lives. To do less would be to disobey the Incarnate One we worship who came preaching good news to the poor.

Our situation is not hopeless. In the last twenty years, both the number and the proportion of chronically undernourished people have fallen significantly. In 1970, approximately 36% of the developing world’s people were chronically undernourished. In 1990, the developing world’s population had grown dramatically, but only 20% were chronically undernourished.

In those same years, the world's wealth has increased dramatically. We have both the means and the knowledge to end the scandal of starvation and malnutrition in the midst of plenty.

Almost everywhere today, nations are moving toward market-oriented economies. And in some nations the result has been rapid creation of wealth and a dramatic reduction of poverty. As we rejoice in this reduction of suffering, biblical people will ask hard questions: Is the environment being protected adequately? Is this wealth being shared fairly? Is new abundance tempting us to materialistic trust in Mammon rather than God?

However we answer these important questions, one painful, glaring fact is clear. One-fifth of God's people simply cannot participate in the global market economy. They have almost no land, no education, no money, and often not even a poorly paid job to occupy strong, eager hands. To endorse the advantages of market economies without empowering these forgotten ones to acquire the capital to participate in the market would be inconsistent and disobedient.

The God of Israel gave every Israelite family enough land to earn their own way. The same God now summons Christians to struggle for justice and to offer similar opportunity to the one billion persons almost totally excluded from today's growing economies. For some, the necessary capital will be land; for others education, a small loan, or a decent job opportunity. The God who summons all those created in His image to responsible work demands that they have the opportunity.

There are many ways to provide the basic capital. Governments, churches, businesses, and voluntary organizations all have important responsibilities.

We believe that small loans to poor people for micro-enterprise development is one of the very promising ways to empower the poor to help themselves. In the last decade private Christian organizations making such loans have enabled

the poor to create hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Now is the time to expand this successful model a hundredfold. The Christians of the world enjoy an income of at least 10 trillion dollars a year. It only takes about 500 dollars to create a new job among the poor and improve the living standard of a family of five by 50% within a year. At 500 dollars per job, one percent of Christian income for just one year could create new small loans producing 200 million new jobs. In one year, that many new jobs could improve the well-being of one billion people!

Micro-enterprise schemes, to be sure, cannot stand on their own. Without fair legal systems, prudent macro-economic policies and adequate public services, even gifted poor entrepreneurs cannot flourish. But millions of small loans accompanied by the necessary supporting framework could revolutionize the lot of the poor.

We have the resources. Do we have the will and the compassion? Will we offer the poor of the earth the capital to earn their own way? Would Christians who claim to surrender 100% of their heart to the Lord be ready to loan 1% of their income to God's poor?

We invite all Christians to join us in this simple covenant: Before God and the world's poor, we covenant to give one percent of our income this year to micro-enterprise projects for small loans to the poor.

We call on Christians of the world to join this global movement to stand with the poor by helping them acquire the capital they need to participate as dignified members of the human family. We call on Christians of the world to imitate the God of Israel who gave every family enough capital to earn a living. We call on Christians of the world to empower all the world's families to sit under their own vine and fig tree, enjoying the fruit of their labours. We call on the Christians of the world to share their capital as they share their Christ, so that the world's poor may delight in both bread from the earth and the Bread of Life.

***Would
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Original Endorsees:

Vinay Samuel (India)
Ruth Callanta (Philippines)
David Bussau (Australia)
Tito Paredes (Peru)
Moss Ntlha (South Africa)
Ronald J. Sider (USA)
Linwood T. Geiger (USA)
Bob Goudzwaard (Netherlands)
Milton Guerrero (Peru)
P.J. Hill (USA)
Roger Johnson (USA)
Florinda T. Juarez (Philippines)
George K. Kinoti (Kenya)
Henry Kontor (UK)
Paul Kratzer (India)
Kennedy Mkutu (USA)
George Monsma (USA)
Stephen Mugabi (Kenya)
Luminita Oancea (UK)
Ioan Peia (Romania)
David Porteous (S. Africa)
Adriana Powell (Argentina)
C. Robertson (India)
M. Martha Robertson (India)

P. Y. Singh (India)
Stephen L.S. Smith (USA)
James Solomon (India)
Ben Sprunger (USA)
Don Stephens (USA)
Chris Sugden (UK)
Judy Powell Thomas (Paraguay)
Trevor Thomas (Paraguay)
Ng Kam Weng (Malaysia)
Ajit Tilakawardane (Sri Lanka)

Note: To receive further information on programs that make small loans to the poor in the name of Christ, or to register your joining with other Christians on all continents in this Covenant on Christian Capital, write to the International Fellowship of Evangelical Mission Theologians: UK (Oxford Centre for Missions Studies, P.O. Box 70, Oxford OX2 6HB); Australia (Maranatha Trust, P.O. Box 886, Bondi Junction 2022 NSW); North America (10 Lancaster Avenue, Wynnewood, PA 19096). ■