

The Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics: Some Comments and Questions

This Declaration, composed by more than 100 Christians meeting in Oxford, England in January, 1990 should provoke Christians to some creative thinking about the meaning of economic justice at the end of the Twentieth Century. A new way may now be opening for the critical consideration of economic matters from a Christian perspective — a viewpoint that will amount to more than simply an accommodation to liberalism or Marxism. Communist experiments are collapsing in large part because of economic failure. Free-market liberalism has been around much longer and has had more opportunities to prove itself. But still, in the West and elsewhere in the world, many economic as well as social problems remain unresolved under capitalist systems—problems of environmental depletion, employment of the poor and ill-trained, and international movements of technology, money, and labor.

Many of the signers of the Oxford Declaration have been doing serious writing and research, so the document is an outgrowth of more than merely a few days of conversation. Think, for example, of conference organizer Ronald J. Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984); Bob Goudzwaard's *Capitalism and Progress* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979); Ronald H. Nash's *Poverty and Wealth: The Christian Debate Over Capitalism* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1986); and Richard C. Chewing's four volume series (in progress) on biblical principles and economics — "Christians in the Market Place" (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1989-1990).

Preamble

The declaration begins with a Christ-centered confession of faith which affirms, among other things, that the Scriptures are "our supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct," and that God "made a perfect world for human beings created to live in fellowship with God."

Moreover, as a matter of first importance, the document affirms the Biblical testimony that "Justice is basic to Christian perspectives on economic life." "Justice expresses God's actions to restore God's provision to those who have been deprived and to punish those who have violated God's standards."

EDITOR'S NOTE

This article was originally published as Background Paper #90:2, by the Center for Public Justice, 321 Eighth Street, N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002. It is reprinted here by permission of the author. Paragraph numbers in this article are those which appeared in the Spring 1990 issue of the ACE Bulletin.

AUTHOR

James W. Skillen is Director of the Center for Public Justice, Washington, D.C., and author of *The Scattered Voice: Christians at Odds in the Public Square* (Zondervan, 1990).

Creation and Stewardship

The first major section of the declaration starts with creation. Several basic Biblical principals are summarized — all quite well. God is the Creator and owner of all things. Human beings are called to be “stewards” of what God owns. “The greatness of creation — both human and non-human — exists to glorify God.”

Sin is the root of greed, ecological destruction, neglect of the poor, and other economic evils. The foundations of a healthy economy are to be found in the right order of creation’s relation to God — and, consequently, in the right relations among all creatures. Sin is the distortion of these right relations because of disobedience to God. “The dominion which God gave human beings over creation (Genesis 1:30) does not give them license to abuse creation. First, they are responsible to God, in whose image they were made, not to ravish creation but to sustain it, as God sustains it in divine providential care. Second, since human beings are created in the image of God for community and not simply as isolated individuals (Genesis 1:28), they are to exercise dominion in a way that is responsible to the needs of the total human family, including future generations.”

Up to this point, the declaration is an inspirational confession, highlighting some fundamental Biblical teachings. But beginning with paragraph #8, the document jumps quickly to contemporary society without having laid a sufficient basis for explaining the development of economic institutions in God’s creation — an institutional development that has led, by our day, to the formation of major corporations, massive accumulations of capital, extensive migrations of people for purposes of employment, and the existence of a highly complex diversity of economic, educational, familial, and political organizations unlike anything known in Biblical times.

Why should this be a problem for a declaration such as this? After all, a brief

declaration can hardly be expected to do what a textbook or theological treatise can do. The difficulty, as I will try to show, is that the statement allows important differences in economic judgment among the signers to be covered over by general confessional statements. Instead of sharpening the meaning of economic agreement among Christians, the statement allows one set of words to serve an equivocal purpose — to be interpreted in different ways by those who differ over economic policies and principles.

If the purpose of the statement were simply to show that those who hold different economic views can nonetheless agree on a basic Christian confession about life, then it serves a wonderful purpose. But if the statement is intended to point the way toward a potentially new economic agreement from a Christian perspective, then its greatest weaknesses appear precisely at those points where it needs to be the strongest. I will try to illustrate this in what follows.

In referring to the legitimacy of productivity in God’s creation (Par. #8), for example, the statement says, “In assessing economic systems from a Christian perspective, we must consider their ability both to generate and to distribute wealth and income justly.” This is a good and true statement, but it takes for granted the phrase “economic systems,” and the very meaning of those words is a big question today. For some, an “economic system” is a highly political entity; for others it is something that ought to be largely independent of the political sphere. Moreover, Christians might be able to agree that the generation and distribution of wealth and income should be just, but they are also likely to disagree over the meaning of both “justice” and “generation and distribution.”

Paragraphs #9 and #10 pick up this problematic momentum very quickly. The words “technology,” “industrialization,” and “corporations” (to mention but three) are used in paragraphs that essentially

Instead of sharpening the meaning of economic agreement among Christians, the statement allows one set of words to serve an equivocal purpose . . .

... to say that governments should create and enforce just frameworks and incentives can be interpreted in radically different ways with respect to concrete policy proposals.

serve to affirm the agreement of the signers that "we must search for ways to use appropriate technology responsibly according to every cultural context." But the meaning of the "we" becomes increasingly ambiguous because the kinds of responsibility to which the declaration wants to call Christians in different "cultural contexts" are necessarily spread out differently among governments, corporations, households, individuals, and so forth. All the signers agree, for example, that "technology should not foster disintegration of family or community, or function as an instrument of social dominion." But who is responsible in what institutional ways to make sure that such disintegration does not take place? The declaration does not say.

Consider but one illustration. A variety of different modern technologies have led to the disintegration of rural communities in the United States and throughout the world. The world is increasingly becoming urbanized. Over the past four generations of American families, a majority of the population has moved from farms and small towns into major urban areas. Less than 4 percent of the population now lives on farms. Depending on one's outlook, especially if one treasures the values of family coherence, hard work, and a simple lifestyle, this development might be viewed as highly unhealthy. Or it might be viewed as a major step forward in making possible the development of talents and institutional creativity that rural people would never have had the opportunity to experience. Free-market types might be more optimistic about the good achieved by this movement; the more communal types might be more pessimistic. The point of this criticism is simply that the generally positive theological statement (of paragraphs #8-12) about the use of technology does not take us very far into an understanding of the criteria for judging responsible technology.

Paragraph #13 perhaps best illustrates

the critical point in this section. It says: "We urge individuals, private institutions, and governments everywhere to consider both the local, immediate, and the global, long-term ecological consequences of their actions. We encourage corporate action to make products which are more 'environmentally friendly.' And we call on governments to create and enforce just frameworks of incentives and penalties which will encourage both individuals and corporations to adopt ecologically sound practices." While this paragraph recognizes a diversity of institutions by the fact that it lists them, it in no way tries to suggest what their different responsibilities are. It is an appeal to people in general to produce better outcomes. But the ecologically sound outcomes that are desired will depend on quite different responsibilities of each. Thus, to say that governments should create and enforce just frameworks and incentives can be interpreted in radically different ways with respect to concrete policy proposals. The Declaration does not articulate standards by which to judge the actions of governments as it seeks to create and enforce sound practices. One would hope that all Christians can agree to this statement, but it does not go very far in indicating what the institutional and policy consequences should be.

Work and Leisure

The second major section of the document considers work and leisure. Again, some basic Biblical material is introduced and summarized in a worthy fashion. Work "is central to the Creator's intention for humanity" and has "intrinsic value." "Christians should do their work in the service of God and humanity." "The deepest meaning of human work is that the almighty God established human work as a means to accomplish God's work in the world." "Human work has consequences that go beyond the preservation of creation to the anticipation of the eschatological transformation of the world."

Sin distorts the meaning of work both with respect to the service of God and with respect to the service of fellow human beings. Sin is what leads to alienation and pain in our labor. "People should never be treated in their work as mere means." And yet they are. Work is service, and yet in sin it becomes highly self-interested. Women and "marginalized groups" are especially discriminated against in work.

While this section does not say much about the redemptive restoration of work through Jesus Christ, it does affirm that God's redemptive purpose is to overcome the evils brought on by sin. Therefore, the God of the Bible "condemns exploitation and oppression." People everywhere should be restored to meaningful work. "It is a freedom right, since work in its widest sense is a form of self-expression."

Yet here again, the broad statements that should win agreement from many different Christians can be interpreted in different ways, and the differences are not articulated. Consider, for example, paragraph #26: "The right to earn a living would be a positive or sustenance right. Such a right implies the obligation of the community to provide employment opportunities. Employment cannot be guaranteed where rights conflict and resources may be inadequate. However, the fact that such a right cannot be enforced does not detract in any way from the obligation to seek the highest level of employment which is consistent with justice and the availability of resources."

What does this paragraph really say? It implies that people have a right. But a right to be claimed against whom, by appeal to what authority? Who has authority to decide whether or not sufficient resources are available to make employment possible for those who claim the right to work? And who is obligated to seek the highest level of employment consistent with justice and the availability of resources? What is "the community" referred to here? At what point is a high level of employment inconsistent with

justice, and why? Obviously, behind the declaration's statement are dozens of unstated assumptions and points of disagreement on economic policies and institutional responsibilities. Free-market types will say that a high level of employment made possible by high levels of taxation and redistribution is unjust. The more liberal economist will say that the "community" may justly redistribute some resources in order to help make work available for those who have a right to work. The paragraph takes for granted a highly differentiated society in which governments, corporations, and many institutions hold different degrees of responsibility for work, but it does not help to illumine the character and obligations of that complex society.

The few brief paragraphs on leisure and rest properly emphasize the need of enjoyment and relaxation, of worship on the sabbath and the avoidance of workaholism. What is disappointing, however, is that these paragraphs do not emphasize the vision of eschatological fulfillment of work itself in God's kingdom. The sabbath rest, after all, is not just a good habit for our lives in this age; it is anticipatory of the final sabbath feast, of the day when the great master says "well done good and faithful servant." The Oxford Declaration says that rest "consists in the enjoyment of nature as God's creation, in the free exercise and development of abilities which God has given to each person, in the cultivation of fellowship with one another, and above all, in delight in communion with God." While this is true about rest, these sentences should also be used to describe the meaning of work in this world. Rest and leisure should not be connected with real human enjoyment while work is left in the realm of drudgery and lack of communion with God. The Biblical meaning of rest shines through when we see that it points as a sign to the ultimate fulfillment of our labors, our work, in the kingdom of God.

... behind the declaration's statement are dozens of unstated assumptions and points of disagreement on economic policies and institutional responsibilities.

Both those who believe in greater government involvement and those who believe in fewer government initiatives can affirm . . . this declaration without indicating what they mean . . .

Poverty and Justice

The third major section of the declaration deals with the primary "problem" that economists are always trying to solve: poverty. God did not intend that there should be any poverty, according to the statement. Moreover, God is the "defender of the poor" (Psalm 146:7-9). We are called to help the poor and to help overcome poverty.

What are the causes of poverty? They are "many and complex" — ranging from "cultural attitudes and actions taken by social, economic, political and religious institutions" to natural disasters.

Whatever the causes of poverty — and all causes should be studied — the Bible's call for justice demands that special attention be given to the poor. The "common link" in the Bible between widows, orphans, resident aliens, wage earners, slaves, and the poor "is powerlessness by virtue of economic and social needs. The justice called forth is to restore these groups to the provision God intends for them."

Individuals, families, churches, and governments are all responsible to aid the poor. And justice "may also require socio-political actions that enable the poor to help themselves and be the subjects of their own development and the development of their communities. We believe that we and the institutions in which we participate are responsible to create an environment of law, economic activity, and spiritual nurture which creates these conditions."

Here again, the statement affirms an undoubted good, namely, that people should help the poor and that the poor should help themselves. Everyone is responsible somehow. But these paragraphs in themselves do not convince me that we should or should not ask our federal government to spend more money on a jobs program for the unemployed. They do not let me see why it would or would not be good to increase state aid to the hungry through food-stamp supple-

ments. Both those who believe in greater government involvement and those who believe in fewer government initiatives can affirm what is said in this declaration without indicating what they mean by the words.

This section concludes with paragraphs on the world debt crisis, inflation, military expenditures, the drug crisis, and several other matters that greatly affect the poor. But the admonitions don't lead very far. For example: "Both lenders and borrowers shared in creating this [global] debt. The result has been increasing impoverishment of the people. Both lenders and borrowers must share responsibility for finding solutions."* Or, regarding the two "key agents" responsible for the drug trade: the "rich markets which consume drugs must end their demand. And the poorer countries which produce them must switch to other products." This is not very powerful or insightful.

While I am critical of these somewhat superficial appeals for good to be done, I should point out that the conferees who signed this declaration also spent considerable time developing a separate document that is more detailed in its attention to "credit-based, income generation programs." I will not comment on that document here, but perhaps in its greater detail, the reader will find ideas, principles, and a framework of argument that is illustrative of how one might deal with these other issues that the group touched upon so lightly. [That document is entitled "Statement on Income Generation by the Poor" and is available from the Oxford Conference, Ronald J. Sider, General Secretary, 10 Lancaster Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19151; (215-645-9354).]

Freedom, Government and Economics

The loaded burden of the Oxford Declaration really becomes evident in this fourth and concluding section. Although the ambiguous language of "rights" has been used earlier in the document, here (beginning in Par. #49) the writers finally

acknowledge that the language of rights is not always clear. "Therefore," they say, "it is important to have clear criteria for what defines rights." The next four paragraphs attempt to clarify the Christian meaning of rights. "In seeking human rights we search for an authority or norm which transcends our situation. God is that authority; God's character constitutes that norm. Since human rights are prior rights, they are not conferred by the society or the state. Rather, human rights are rooted in the fact that every human being is made in the image of God. The deepest ground of human dignity is that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8)."

This is not an entirely clear statement, however. Several unanswered questions remain: What is the relation between God's authority and that of the state and society? If human rights are grounded in God's creation of us in his image, then do we have no one other than God to whom to appeal for the recognition of those rights? In what respect does human dignity require recognition by various God-appointed human authorities? And what is the relation between Christ's death for us and our original created character as the image of God?

The next paragraph (#51) goes on to affirm that God's justice for human beings "requires life, freedom, and sustenance." But it does not go beyond reference to God's justice to clarify which human institutions should do what to affirm or protect human rights, though it does take for granted such human responsibility: "It is a requirement of justice that human beings, including refugees and stateless persons, are able to live in society with dignity. Human beings therefore have a claim on other human beings for social arrangements that ensure that they have access to the sustenance that makes life in society possible." But how do human beings make claims on one another? An answer to this question would require the articulation of different institutional identities and responsibilities such as the

claims of children on their parents, of students on their teachers, of citizens on governments, etc.

Leaving this matter of human rights up in the air, the declaration moves on to a consideration of democracy, declaring that "no political system is directly prescribed by scripture," but "biblical values and historical experience call Christians to work for the adequate participation of all people in the decision-making processes on questions that affect their lives." This modest vote for democracy is also problematic. Consider this question, for example: What kind of participation is "adequate" in what kinds of institutions, since all "decision-making processes" affect people's lives? The signers are surely not calling for the radical democratization of families, are they? What about business enterprises? Even with respect to political life, who is to decide what is adequate democratic representation? Why should we even view democracy as somehow being in accord with God's authority and character?

In this section the document makes repeated reference to what "historical experience" teaches. "Recent history suggests that a dispersion of ownership of the means of production is a significant component of democracy. Monopolistic ownership, either by the state, large economic institutions, or oligarchies is dangerous. Widespread ownership, either in a market economy or a mixed system tends to decentralize power and prevent totalitarianism." These statements sound like the contribution made by the more conservative authors of the document. Clearly, the "recent history" must be the collapsing communist governments of Eastern Europe. Communism doesn't work, and capitalism does. But what kind of democratic capitalism should satisfy Christians? What parts of history are instructive to us and why? These paragraphs do not answer these questions. They say less about what targets ought to be hit, and more about what ought to be

What is the relation between God's authority and that of the state and society?

... why stress the "minimum" task of government and not declare what its high calling before God ought to be, from a Christian point of view?

avoided, namely, totalitarianism. But how widely dispersed should ownership be? And how vigorous should government be in forcing decentralization?

The next paragraphs (#57-59) continue this theme, lauding the general economic merits of market-oriented economies over centrally planned economies. And the declaration then acknowledges that the relation of the economy to other institutions becomes all the more urgent a concern in a free-market society. "As non-capitalist countries increasingly turn away from central planning and towards the market, the question of capitalism's effect on culture assumes more and more importance. The market system can be an effective means of economic growth, but can, in the process, cause people to think that ultimate meaning is found in the accumulation of more goods." "There is also the danger that the model of the market, which may work well in economic transactions, will be assumed to be relevant to other areas of life, and people may consequently believe that what the market encourages is therefore best or most true." All of this is to say that a free-market economy does not answer all of life's questions. But the Oxford document does not really tell us much about the way in which a free-market economy helps people to realize the meaning of work, stewardship, leisure, technology, and justice in the service of God and neighbors.

In paragraphs #60-62, the document returns to the role of government, but stays at a level of generality that covers disagreements. It says, among other things, that "significant decisions about local human communities are usually best made at a level of government most directly responsible to the people affected." "At a minimum, government must establish a rule of law that protects life, secures freedom, and provides basic security. Special care must be taken to make sure the protection of fundamental rights is extended to all members of society, especially the poor and oppressed

(Proverbs 31:8-9; Daniel 4:27)." But why stress the "minimum" task of government and not declare what its high calling before God ought to be, from a Christian point of view? And who is supposed to take "special care" that "fundamental rights" are extended to all members of society? Is government supposed to do this? If so, what are the fundamental rights it is supposed to uphold in contrast to the human rights that parents, or employers, or church authorities are supposed to uphold or enforce?

"The provision of sustenance rights is also an appropriate function of government. Such rights must be carefully defined so that government's involvement will not encourage irresponsible behavior and the breakdown of families and communities. In a healthy society, this fulfillment of rights will be provided through a diversity of institutions so that the government's role will be that of last resort." This is an example of where the document's approach to concreteness leads to confusion. If it is appropriate for the government to provide sustenance rights, then why should it do so only as a first and second and third resort? If parents should sustain their children, and employers should sustain their employees, then may children and employees ever appeal to the government to enforce their right to sustenance from their parents and employers? Or should individuals be able to go to government directly if they are hungry, or without housing, or in need of further education? The Declaration does not help us answer these questions.

Paragraph #63 introduces the concept of "mediating structures" but does so in a way that makes no direct connection between them and the economy. Their purpose seems to be primarily a means of decreasing the need for centralized government, and a way of influencing other institutions. But what are they in themselves, and where do they fit into a document on economics?

Conclusion

The conclusion of the Oxford Declaration consists of a brief paragraph (#65) which expresses thankfulness for Christian cooperation in drafting the document and appeals to Christians to work for stewardship and justice in economic life. "We will therefore endeavor to seek every opportunity to work for the implementation of the principles outlined in this Declaration, in faithfulness to God's calling."

I wish that the document would have stated boldly that the signers were aware that they had drafted a document that covered their differences as well as affirmed their confessional agreement as Christians. It would have been more useful, perhaps, had it outlined the tasks yet to be done if Christians are to work out a more complete economic perspective for the complex and detailed realities of contemporary society.

This is not to say that the declaration is not useful and encouraging. The fact that it manifests the fruits of Christian community is an encouragement in itself. I thank all those who labored on it as a means of

bringing Christians together who otherwise might have stayed apart. But a casual reader could come away from the document believing that it really is a statement of principles, when in fact, it is a general Christian confession about life with some references to a variety of economically connected realities. It does not go very far in articulating a Christian understanding of economics, production, business, labor, public policy, and the responsibilities of the multiple institutions of our society for economic justice. That remains to be done. We can hope, therefore, that this document will encourage Christians who hold different economic views to keep on working together. ■

*The issue of the world debt crisis is the subject of a "statement" put out by a group of ecumenical religious leaders September 21-23, 1989 in Washington, D. C. My evaluation of that statement (published in *The Christian Century*, November 8, 1989) has some parallels to my response to this Oxford Declaration.