

BIBLICAL ECONOMICS TODAY

Vol. V., No. 2

©Institute for Christian Economics, 1981

Apr./May, 1982

RONALD SIDER *CONTRA DEUM*

In 1974 Creation House, a publishing firm located in the heartland of American neo-evangelicalism, released *The Chicago Declaration*, edited by Ronald J. Sider. The book recounted the proceedings and conclusions of the Thanksgiving Workshop on Evangelicals and Social Concern held during Thanksgiving 1973 "while the rest of American Protestantism was enjoying the annual festival of orgy and guilt." The Workshop resulted in the issuing of "The Chicago Declaration" denouncing unspecified "social abuses," "an unjust American society," "racism," "exploitaion," "social and political injustice of our nation," "materialism," "the maldistribution of the nation's wealth and services," "a national pathology of war and violence," and supporting the "social and economic rights of the poor and the oppressed," and a "more just acquisition and distribution of the world's resources." In short, there was little about the "Declaration" that distinguished it from any other socialist or Marxist diatribe against that devil America and all her works and manifestations.

What did distinguish the "Declaration," and what prompts this writer to mention it here, is the list of people who signed it. Perhaps for the first time some leading churchmen took an action that, had it been taken fifty years earlier, would have led to the swift recognition that here were men who had discarded the gospel to pursue their socialist goals. No such reaction greeted the "Declaration." Among the signers were John F. Alexander, Frank Gaebeline, Vernon Grounds, Nancy Hardesty, Carl F. H. Henry, C. T. McIntire, Bernard Ramm, Elton Trueblood, Foy Valentine, Leighton Ford, Tom Skinner, Mark Hatfield, John Howard Yoder, and, of course, Sider himself.

Out of this 1973 Workshop grew Evangelicals for Social Action (ESA), and later the International Consultation on Simple Lifestyle, which included such people as John R. W. Stott, a British socialist, and Harvie Conn of Westminster Theological Seminary.

With supporters from the neo-evangelical mainstream like that, Sider was able to move to a major neo-evangelical publisher, Inter-Varsity Press, which in 1977 released the manifesto of the movement, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, in cooperation with the Roman Catholic Paulist Press. This was followed by *Christ and Violence* (Herald Press, 1979), *Living More Simply* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1980),

and *Cry Justice!* (Inter-Varsity and Paulist Press, 1980). It is obvious that Sider's ideas have had a great impact on some professing Christians, particularly the young who are most likely to be influenced by groups such as Inter-Varsity, Campus Crusade, and Young Life. Because of this influence, it is desirable to analyze the movement for which Sider is the leading spokesman to see whether it be Christian.

Economics and Theology

Many professing Christians have the erroneous idea that it is unspiritual to discuss economics. No man, say they, can discuss two matters. One must discuss either God or money. But the Bible knows nothing of this attitude, and the same list of Commandments that begins by discussing God, ends by discussing economics: You shall not covet your neighbor's house ... wife ... manservant ... maidservant ... ox... donkey... or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Sider cannot be accused of ignoring economics (although he does ignore the Commandment just quoted). While he is certainly not an economist (which he admits on page 8 of *Rich Christians*), he has very definite economic views. These views, he claims, are derived from the Bible, and it is my purpose to examine that contention. Not only are Sider's views absent from the Bible, they are opposed to the Bible. The true state of affairs is: Ronald Sider *contra Deum*.

Economics is a branch of theology. An economics deduced from Christian theology will be a Christian economics, but one cannot logically derive a Christian economics from non-Christian theology. Determining Sider's theological position is, therefore, of the first importance. Unfortunately, he pays extremely little attention to the weightier matters of theology in any of his relevant books. He is, in many ways, a mirror image of those Christians who do not like to discuss economics: He does not like to discuss theology. In fact, he is so reluctant to discuss theology, he twice refused to reply to a certified letter sent to him by this writer, even though he had stated in a previous letter that he "would welcome any further correspondence with you that you might wish." (Letter of January 25, 1980.)¹

Because of such stonewalling, it will be necessary to focus on the few statements about theology that Sider makes in his books, pamphlets, and newsletters. For example, the February 1981 issue of *ESA Update* makes fun of the recent

This essay by Dr. John Robbins first appeared in the March/April, 1981 issue of *The Trinity Review*, which is published by The Trinity Foundation. For more information about the publication program of The Trinity Foundation, write to P.O. Box 169, Jefferson, MD; 21755. Dr. Robbins is the author of *An Answer to Ayn Rand* (\$5), a Christian analysis of the philosophy of Objectivism.

1. Sider has refused to respond to another letter from the author asking for documentation of some charges that Sider made in a letter to the author following the first publication of this essay

concern over the inerrancy of the Bible. So it is reasonable to assume that inerrancy is a matter of little concern to Sider and his friends.

Then there is the matter of authority. Are the cries of the "hungry poor" the voice of God? *Vox pauperum, vox dei*? Apparently so, since a paper released by the International Consultation on Simple Lifestyle contains these sentences: "We have tried to listen to the voice of God, through the pages of the Bible, through the cries of the hungry poor, and through each other. And we believe God has spoken to us." So much for the evangelical doctrine of *sola scriptura*—the Bible alone as the voice of God. When our modern "prophets" hear voices, it is well to remember Jeremiah 23: "I did not send these prophets, yet they have run with their message; I did not speak to them, yet they have prophesied." For those who do not care to recall Jeremiah, perhaps a secular 20th century writer will do: "Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back." Fads and fashions in the church have followed fads and fashions in philosophy and politics for about 200 years now. Sider's movement is the ecclesiastical tail on the socialist political dog. Far from being the vanguard, it is the rearguard of the socialist movement.

Since Sider's authority is not *sola scriptura*, he has no right to call himself and his friends evangelicals. One cannot be an evangelical without affirming that the Bible alone is the source of authority, for that is what "evangelical" means: one who believes *sola scriptura*, and *sola fide*. This deliberate misuse of language is characteristic of the 20th century, both in politics and theology; we have seen it happen with words such as "divinity," "infallibility," and "liberation," and George Orwell devoted a great deal of time and study to analyzing such doublespeak. Today, "divine" means "human," "infallible" means "mistaken," "liberation" means "slavery," and an "evangelical" is one who does not accept *sola scriptura*.

Who, then, does Sider rely on for his views? Well, *Cry Justice!*, which is subtitled "The Bible Speaks on Hunger and Poverty," is interrupted by material obtained from several leftist sources such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. *Rich Christians* is loaded with material taken from such sources as the World Bank; the United Nations; Lester Brown; Bread for the World, a political lobby favoring more government foreign aid; and a representative of the Institute for Policy Studies, a far Left propaganda machine in Washington, D.C. He also refers approvingly to theologians such as Karl Barth (neo-orthodox) and Charles Finney (Pelagian), and to leftists and socialists like Robert Heilbroner and E. F. Schumacher. When he recommends groups for his readers to help or join, he invariably recommends what can only be called apostate, non-Christian organizations: The Interreligious Task Force on U.S. Food Policy, the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, Bread for the World, the National Council of Churches, Network, and the Friends Committee on National Legislation.

We must conclude that Sider is not an evangelical, but someone who has assumed that label in order to get a hearing among those who consider themselves evangelicals. His ploy, it should be noted, has worked well. But his economics are not evangelical economics.

Sider as Historian

For someone who holds a Ph.D. in history from Yale, Sider's understanding of history seems superficial. He regards this age as an Age of Hunger, and so it is. But the same thing may be said of every age: the history of mankind is the history

of hunger. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1965) lists 31 major famines from antiquity to 1960. But the incidence of famine has decreased in the last century:

We might be inclined to deduce from the pictorial evidence of famine that we have seen recently on television, in newspapers, and in magazines that the world is more prone to famine now than it used to be. But the evidence is clearly to the contrary. Both the percentage of the world's population afflicted by famine in recent decades and the absolute number have been relatively small compared with those occurring in those earlier periods of history for which we have reasonably reliable estimates of famine deaths.

There has been a rather substantial reduction in the incidence of famine during the past century. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century perhaps 20 million to 25 million died from famine... For the entire twentieth century to the present (1975), there have probably been between 12 million and 15 million famine deaths, and many, if not the majority, were due to deliberate governmental policy, official mismanagement, or war and not to serious crop failure.

(D. Gale Johnson, *World Food Problems and Prospects*, American Enterprise Institute, p. 17.)

If Sider were serious about ending hunger — rather than pushing his reactionary political nostrums — he would attempt to discover why hunger disappeared in those nations that once were dominated by evangelical Christianity and which are still living off the spiritual capital of the past: Western Europe and North America. Instead, he prefers to believe and teach the Marxist mythology that other countries are poor largely because America has exploited them and become rich. It is not widespread hunger that distinguishes this age; it is unprecedented prosperity. Sider is hostile to that prosperity and to the political-economic system that produced it: *capitalism*. He dreams of prosperity without the rich, food for all without the food producers. God promises to prosper those who obey him, and the prosperity of the West is obvious evidence of God's faithfulness. Sider regards it as evidence of our immorality.

Sider as Economist

One cannot read *Rich Christians* without sensing that here is a mind to whom the Eighth and Tenth Commandments mean nothing. Not only does Sider covet his neighbors' goods, he advocates the use of force to take property away from his neighbors. For example, he suggests quadrupling government foreign aid, raising federal taxes, imposing minimum wage laws, government job training programs, legislation to shorten the work week, United Nations control of the oceans and outer space, international taxation and redistribution, population control, and government guaranteed jobs and incomes. If Sider's message were simply to be generous with one's property, then this writer would have no quarrel with him. But that is not his message. His message is that political power must be used to redistribute property, that is, not only may governments violate the Eighth Commandment, they *ought* to. Sider actually attacks personal charity and generosity. He dismisses the feeding of five million by "private charities from the United States" as "only a symbolic gesture." He attacks Christ's message of personal generosity by saying that

Personal charity and philanthropy still permit the rich donor to feel superior. And it makes the recipient feel inferior and dependent. Institutional changes, on the

other hand, give the oppressed rights and power... personal charity is too arbitrary and haphazard. It depends on the whim and feelings of the well off. Many needy people fail to meet those who can help. Proper institutional change (e.g. minimum wage) on the other hand automatically benefits everyone.

It is language like this that leads one to believe that the actual purpose of Sider's "graduated tithe," whereby those with higher incomes give a much greater percentage of their incomes away, is not to encourage private charity, but to incite the envy of his readers. After all, all socialism is based on envy, and Sider's socialism is no exception.

Is Sider a Marxist?

It should be obvious that Sider's agenda is not that of Paul or Christ, but that of Marx or Shaw. His books are full of Marxist terminology such as "economic violence," "exploitation," "proletariat," "social justice," "structural change," and "new international economic order." He even entitles a section in *Rich Christians* "Is God a Marxist?" His answer is obviously yes, although he hasn't the honesty to say it, for the "God of the Bible wreaks horrendous havoc on the rich" because "the rich regularly oppress the poor and neglect the needy." Moreover, "God is on the side of the poor."

Sider has kind words for the former Marxist president of Chile, Allende, and criticizes no governments except those of the United States, Brazil, South Korea, and Chile. He apparently sees no problem with the communist governments of the world, or if he does, he does not think it important enough to criticize them. Even though, as we have seen, most of the famine deaths in the 20th century have been due to "deliberate government policy," he keeps his silence about the starvation imposed on their unfortunate subjects by socialist governments.²

He does, however, repeatedly criticize the "multinational corporations" that "oppress" and "exploit" workers in the Third World countries, yet he cites no evidence for such "oppression." He quotes E. F. Schumacher with approval:

It is obvious that the world cannot afford the USA.

Nor can it afford Western Europe or Japan.... Think of it — one American drawing on resources that would sustain 50 Indians!... The poor don't do much damage. Virtually all damage is done by say, 15%... The problem passengers on Spaceship Earth are the first-class passengers and no one else.

If Sider and Schumacher got their way, and the U.S., Japan, and Western Europe were removed, the rest of the world would not become richer, it would face unprecedented starvation. Hundreds of millions of the poor, whom Sider would have us believe he likes, would die within the year. It is only an ideologically blinded mind that can make statements like that above. Such delusions are the stuff of which socialism is made. The poorer nations have gotten richer, not poorer, along with the more advanced nations, and they have gotten richer faster insofar as they have successfully imitated the economic and political arrangements of the West.

In the many statistics that he quotes detailing the amount of food and energy the U.S. uses, Sider neglects to tell us

how much food and energy the U.S. produces. Such selective citing of statistics can only be a calculated attempt to induce guilt in his readers, for men who feel guilty are more easily manipulated.

Sider also berates the United States for its destruction of the environment. It is amazing how misinformed a Yale Ph.D. can be. The government of the U.S.S.R., which had enacted many of the laws Sider recommends, has not adopted the environmental practices and regulations of this country. Where else in the world has a multi-billion dollar dam been stopped by a three-inch fish?

The Question of Property

One of the fundamental errors Sider makes is that he believes, in the words of the neo-orthodox theologian Nels Ferre, that "All property belongs to God for the common good. It belongs, therefore, first of all to God and then equally to society and the individual. When the individual has what the society needs and can profitably use, it is not his, but belongs to society, by divine right." Sider expresses the same view in these words: "The human right to a just living transcends the right of North Americans to use their vast grain fields solely for themselves."

Sider believes that this view is based upon Scripture, but he does not cite any text to support the idea of a "human right to a just living." The Bible knows nothing of any human rights, and certainly not of a "right to a just living." One human being has no right to the property of another, for that property does not belong to "society" but to God. God uses that property for his own good, not the common good. As the Catechism says: "Q. Why did God create you and all things? A. For his own glory." Neither God nor the government owes any man a living.

Sider would have us believe that when God put man on the earth, he gave the earth to men jointly, but not severally. Nowhere does he present any evidence for this idea. God, holding ultimate ownership of the earth, gave it to men severally, not collectively. The argument for this may be found in the works of the 17th century Christian thinker, Robert Filmer, of whom, presumably, Sider has heard. God is not, as Sider believes, impartial. He does not have "the same loving concern for each person he has created." God does not intend for the "earth's resources" "to be husbanded and shared for the benefit of all." On the contrary, he prefers certain persons above others; he loves Jacob and hates Esau. He ordered the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites. His remnant is the apple of his eye, and he governs the universe for the particular good of the Church. Sider offers no proof for his global egalitarianism, for a very good reason: There is none. Rather, the Bible protects private property from the larcenous and the covetous, from those who, like Jezebel, would take private property by force.

Teaching and Giving

The father of situation ethics, Joseph Fletcher, has expressed a view that is widespread among professing Christians: "Spirit and matter are different 'sides' of one reality, one 'ground' of being... In nontheological language, we know now that energy is matter and matter is energy... As somebody said lately, good-bye to all that 'holy gas and gross stuff' dualism."

This, of course, is not the view of the Bible. The Bible's view is that the soul and the body are distinct and separable; that the soul is more important than the body; the mind more important than the belly. Most professing Christians today are

2. In an important essay, David Chilton points out that Sider's Jubilee Fund contributed money to the Communist guerrillas (Sandinistas) in Nicaragua in 1979. ("The Case of the Missing Blueprints," *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction* (Summer 1981), p. 142). Chilton's book, *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators*, is the best analysis and refutation of Sider's views.

materialists, perhaps not so blatantly as Fletcher, but materialists nonetheless. Sometimes this materialism takes the form of what Francis Schaeffer has called "personal peace and affluence," sometimes it takes the form of a preoccupation with the "cultural mandate" to the neglect of the preaching of the gospel; and sometimes it assumes the form of socialism, as in Sider's case. Sider is obviously preoccupied with money and wealth, and uninterested in what the Bible regards as of supreme importance: the well-being of the soul.

Fundamentalists have taken a lot of deserved criticism for their lack of interest in social matters, and a lot of abuse for their emphasis on the welfare of the soul. But is it the fundamentalists who have preserved the proper emphases of the Bible, which condemns both the man who accumulates wealth and the man who gives away all his wealth when both men trust in their actions for their salvation. The Bible teaches that it is the primary mission of the Church as a whole and of individual Christians to teach the mind, not feed the body.

This ordering of priorities may be clearly seen in the life of Christ, who subordinated his miracles of healing to his teaching. (See, for example, Mark 1:35-38 and Matthew 15:21-28.) Christ, who had power to relieve all hunger and heal all diseases, did not do so. His actions — his lack of concern for others — would no doubt be criticized by Sider and his friends, but that is because they have substituted their own ethic of envy for Christ's ethic of benevolence. Christ aided only those whom he taught. He explicitly said that he came to teach, and he gave the same command to teach to his disciples.

Furthermore, the Bible clearly teaches that Christians ought to prefer some people before others in their giving, and that there is no general obligation to help everyone. Some people are not to be helped at all. Those of one's household are to be helped before those outside the household. A man who does not provide for his own family is worse than an infidel, even if he gives a graduated tithe to Evangelicals for Social Action.

After one's own household, the household of faith is next in importance. The famine in Jerusalem must have affected both Christians and non-Christians, but Paul's collection was for "the poor among the saints in Jerusalem." (Romans

15:26.) Persons who are able to work but refuse to do so, even though they are Christians, are not to be helped at all. If any would not work, neither should he eat. Younger widows are not to be aided by the church, even though they are Christians, but are commanded to marry. (See I Timothy 5:9-16.) Those widows who were not exemplary were not to be aided, despite their poverty. Paul knows nothing of the "human right to a just living."

Christians do have an obligation to help other Christians, just as they have an obligation to help the members of their legal family. They have no obligation to help everyone in the world, nor does anyone have a right to demand their assistance (unless, of course, they have contracted to do so, as in a marriage). Christians have no responsibility to relieve the suffering of all the persons in the world. If one recalls the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan continued on his business trip (it was a round trip, and he was carrying wine, oil, and silver coins) after helping the victim of some impatient socialists who could not wait for the government to redistribute his wealth. The good Samaritan did not scout the countryside, looking for others, nor did he begin lobbying for a guaranteed annual income. He loved his neighbor. This is precisely the behavior that Sider condemns as "arbitrary and haphazard." The Good Samaritan, to use two of Sider's phrases, was an "ambulance driver" and not a "tunnel builder." He did not realize the need for structural change and a new international economic order.

Conclusion

Sider's message is not the message of the Bible; neither his economics nor his ethics can be called Christian. He has misled many through his selective citing of statistics and Scripture. He believes that governments may violate the Eighth Commandment whenever they act for the "common good." He dislikes personal charity and generosity. Like many advocates of the socialist gospel before him, he twists the Scriptures to his own destruction. Unfortunately, that destruction is not merely his own, but all those who follow him. We may hope that his influence ends swiftly and permanently.

Pre-Publication Special

Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt-Manipulators, David Chilton's book-length refutation of Ronald Sider's version of liberation theology, has been out of print for several months. He has revised it, and it has been put into a new type face that is easier to read. I added a lengthy introduction which tells the story of how I hired Chilton to produce the book in time for my debate with Sider at the Gordon-Conwell School of Theology in April of 1981. The book includes new information on the relationship between the Jubilee Fund, which Sider promotes, and the Nicaraguan Sandinistas.

We are making available a pre-publication special on the book. In order to get a large initial run (which lowers the cost per book), we will sell the \$4.95 paperback for \$2 *each* to anyone who *donates* \$5 to ICE. This is cheap for a full-size 5" by 8" book. You can order as many copies as you want at this price. There is a deadline: May 3, 1982. On that day, we will place our order with the printer. (Note: if you are a member of the Reconstruction Committee, you don't need to send in the \$5 donation. Order as many as you want for \$2.)

Biblical Economics Today is published six times a year, alternating with **Christian Reconstruction**. It is published by the Institute for Christian Economics, a non-profit, tax-exempt educational organization. It is mailed free of charge to residents of North America. **Subscriptions:** P.O. Box 6116, Tyler, TX 75711. Checks should be made out to **Institute for Christian Economics**.