

**Title:** The biblical call to social responsibility  
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WASHINGTON, D.C.—With this article we begin a series that seeks to rearticulate the aims and foundations of the Center for Public Justice. What better place to begin than with a short commentary on the recently released Chicago Declaration II (CDII), "A Call for Evangelical Renewal." CDII came out of last November's twentieth-anniversary conference celebrating the first Chicago Declaration of 1973 [see [The 1993 Chicago Declaration](#) in the January-February, 1994, issue of the *Public Justice Report*].

Back in 1973, the efforts that eventually led to the founding of the Center for Public Justice were just getting started. In fact, a number of its founders were in conversation with Ron Sider and others who wrote the first Chicago Declaration and started Evangelicals for Social Action (ESA). The concern shared by both organizations was to rejuvenate, or to initiate for the first time, responsible social action on the part of Bible-believing Christians. ESA decided to concentrate on raising the social consciousness of Evangelicals in order to overcome the perceived conflict between evangelism and social action. Those who established the Center for Public Justice decided to focus more particularly on the nature of civic or political responsibility and to ask what distinctive contribution a Christian view of life should make to the fulfillment of that responsibility.

While the second Chicago Declaration has a different cast than the first one, both aim to raise Christian social consciousness in general. CDII arose from an ad hoc gathering of Evangelicals at a three-day conference. ESA leaders had drafted a declaration ahead of time, but a large, pre-selected group of conferees wrote a new document on the spot. Thus, the document represents no particular church or organization; it is backed by no authority other than those, like ESA, who have decided to adopt it as their own. It authorizes no particular institution or authority to carry through with a concrete social or political program. Rather, CDII is a call from a gathering of Evangelicals to anyone who will listen. It is an appeal to Christians to act with greater consistency in loving God and in serving a needy world.

The origin of the 1993 declaration helps to explain both its strength and its weakness. As a heart-felt appeal from an ad hoc group of believers, the document is free to do its heart-searching work without anyone being required to heed it. Its authority resides solely in the quality and force of its moral appeal. If CDII speaks the truth at this hour and can grip one group of Christians after another with the power of God's own call to repentance, renewal, and committed service, then it will have served a powerful purpose. Christians ought to examine and discuss it carefully with that in mind.

Woven through the document is a brief but clear summary of the Gospel. It begins as an expression of thanks for the work of the Holy Spirit in Christian communities where "the sacrificial and compassionate demonstration of the reconciling love of God" is exhibited. Frequently it speaks of the need for repentance from sin and for the acceptance of God's grace in Jesus Christ for forgiveness and renewal. It emphasizes that salvation comes from God in Christ, not from human efforts. It pleads for a "missionary church that, by its witness and love," will draw people "into a living relationship with our Lord." It emphasizes the wide scope of the Gospel, which "is not divided—it embraces both the call to conversion and the summons to justice." And CDII closes on a note of hope and expectation: "Come Lord Jesus."

The weakness of such a declaration, however, appears at the point where its readers must ask what it means—what its implications are, and what it should lead them to do in response. In this regard, the document is a little more difficult to assess.

On the one hand, CDII is very clear about what its authors think should result from heeding its appeal. Much of it is structured in terms of a repeated, rhetorical contrast between "weeping" for what is wrong in the world and "dreaming" of what a healthy world should look like. And it concludes with a series of statements articulating the "commitments" that the authors are making.

From these paragraphs taken together one cannot miss the authors' judgment that godlessness, racism, the disparity between rich and poor, escalating violence and abuse, gender conflicts, marriage breakdowns, environmental destruction, and consumerism are evils that ought to be overcome. And by contrast, the expectation is clear that knowledge of Jesus Christ, racial reconciliation, greater economic equality, conflict resolution, gender and generational harmony, and ecological responsibility are the good things that ought to exist.

In order to resist what is evil and to promote what is good, CDII calls for a renewed commitment to the kingdom of God, to the ardent worship and love of God, to preaching the Gospel, to repentance from complacency about the status quo, and to energetic engagement in social renewal. "Obedience to Jesus' teaching and example," says CDII, "demands congregations that integrate prayer, worship, evangelism, and social transformation."

If CDII is clear in identifying the evil it does not want and the good it does want, this does not necessarily mean, however, that it has achieved its purpose. After a quick read of the document, for example, one might feel that it says nothing significant at all. After all, who will disagree about the lists of goods and evils? Doesn't every Christian want to see an end to racism, environmental destruction, family breakdown, and violence?

Here is where we need to ask more difficult and probing questions about who the declaration addresses and how it addresses them. Typically, people do not act to resist evil and to promote good in the abstract. People do not typically act under the command of a conscience oriented toward good and evil in general. Instead, people act as participants in a variety of specific relationships, organizations, and institutions, ranging from friendships to citizenship in the state, from marriage to membership in a local church. Most questions about good and evil, therefore, come to them as they exercise actual responsibilities in these concrete circumstances.

Take, for example, the statement quoted above about the need for congregations that will integrate "prayer, worship, evangelism, and social transformation." What does this mean? To whom is it addressed? One would hope that pastors and elders in particular churches might read CDII and ask whether the members of their congregations are spending enough time in prayer, worship, and evangelism. But when it comes to "social transformation," what are local pastors or congregational leaders to do? Should every congregation organize soup kitchens and political campaigns? Is there anything that a congregation should not try to do as it heeds the challenge of CDII?

The question, you see, has to do with the relationship between the congregation and all the other institutions in which its members participate. Church members also happen to have marriages, families, jobs, civic responsibilities, schools and clubs. It is all too typical today—and very understandable—that many believing

Christians feel overwhelmed by responsibilities. CDII might easily sound burdensome to them, like a call to change the world when they can barely keep up with housework and a job.

Many church leaders feel the same way. They are already busy running so many programs, promoting missions and evangelism, counseling so many marriages, and trying to prepare a decent sermon now and then, that the thought of taking on even more responsibility seems insane, particularly if CDII is calling them to help organize the transformation of the world. Precisely out of a sense of responsibility, many Christians can easily—and in a good conscience—turn a deaf ear to yet another appeal to assume more responsibility.

Who, then, should bear responsibility for resisting the specified evils and promoting the particular goods that the document enumerates? Every individual does not bear all of these responsibilities in the same way. And particular congregations should not try to bear all of them. It is married couples who need to hear the call to strengthen marriage. The boards and managers of particular corporations are the ones who need to reevaluate their promotion of consumerism. Citizens and government officials need to heed the call to overcome legalized racism and to do more to stop urban violence.

In each of these cases, the call to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God takes on a distinctive character. The call to action does not go out to people in a general, undifferentiated mass. When we ask how we should heed God's call to live thankful lives as redeemed sinners in Jesus Christ, our response must arise from within the actual responsibilities we bear as parents, teachers, employers, citizens, consumers, scientists, artists, and so forth.

How should people in each of these realms of responsibility respond to the appeal of CDII? In trying to answer that question we become aware of the document's limits, for it does not seek to distinguish and clarify such responsibilities. It does not even specify what the informal gathering of Chicago signers will do to fulfill the commitments they enunciate in CDII. This is a moral appeal without directives. It is a prayer for good to triumph over evil, but it offers no guidance about how to achieve the good. And the primary reason for this is that the vocal "we" of the document is not, in fact, a viable subject of action. Those of us who gathered in Chicago and signed the document affirmed "our" commitment and recommitment to certain aims, but we were constituted to do nothing more than sign a declaration. The "we" of the document has no continuing identity beyond the conference; we bear no responsibility together; we have no means by which to act as a group. "We" are not responsible.

But does that matter? Isn't it enough for Christians occasionally to utter prayers and appeals like this just to remind ourselves of the direction in which we ought to be walking? Perhaps. And if that is enough, the strengths of the document to which we refer above will carry the day. But perhaps that is not enough. Perhaps we have reached the point in history when a general appeal made by a gathering of people that bears no responsibility amounts to nothing more than a "resounding gong or a clanging cymbal." Out of weakness in actual performance, Christians gather to do the easy thing: to declare their wishes, which impress no one. Perhaps a declaration such as CDII is so empty and has so little punch that it will actually prove to be counterproductive.

The proof, of course, will be in the pudding. Will actual congregations, real families, specific business enterprises, and particular Christian organizations act in ways that demonstrate more fully than they have in the past what it means to live responsibly before the face of God? Particular organizations, such as the Center for Public Justice, should seek to work out the political implications of CDII's call to responsibility. And, of course, the implications that the Center articulates will be disputed by other Christian civic organizations.

That is reality; that is the actual arena of dispute in which Christians struggle to decide how to serve God in their civic capacities.

Only in such concrete relationships and organizations can people use the word "we" as a subject of action and mean anything by it. The "people of God" do not exist as an acting subject in mass, in general, outside particular structures of accountability and responsibility. That is why the real challenge of evangelical social action today lies not in undifferentiated appeals to an undifferentiated community of believers, but in learning how to follow Jesus in all the different ways God requires of us in our actual marriages, families, work, civic life, buying and selling, and congregational worship and fellowship.