

RESPONSE TO DR. STACKHOUSE'S ADDRESS

By Dr. D. Jeffery Lenn

Professor Max Stackhouse has provided an exceptional model for doing contemporary theological ethics in his address on grace and globalization. He first explores the phenomenon of globalization with a thorough analysis of the various perspectives on its origins and current manifestations along with key questions about its future. He then highlights the necessity of moving beyond the merely descriptive to the normative in order to provide a position from which to judge its impact on localities, regions and nations. He speaks with a fresh voice in the increasingly cantankerous debate that simplistically divides everything into pros and cons. Ethical analysis brings into play an imaginative awareness that significant issues rarely can be resolved in an “either/or” manner. Finally, he enriches the discussion with the inclusion of the theological dimension of globalization. Professor Stackhouse has imaginatively scoured the rich theological tradition of Christianity to find that “grace” can provide a clear lens for understanding the phenomenon. He is correct -- the dynamic nature of the grace of God links nicely with the dynamic phenomenon that is cutting through regional and national boundaries.

Alternatively, the justice of God could be chosen as a lens. It brings into focus two disturbing realities – the dynamics of market systems and the power of the multinational enterprise. The harsh reality of market economies is that they are built on the elevation of self interest into a place of primacy in understanding human behavior. Simply stated, markets operate best when the pursuit of self interest is promoted and protected. The growth of simple markets into a complex market system has resulted in new efficiency and greater wealth but at a significant price for many. The new “laws” of supply and demand built around an impersonal price mechanism have changed work to impersonal and interchangeable labor, introduced consumers as the drivers of demand and elevated entrepreneurs and corporate managers to an elite status. The lens of Christian justice demands a skeptical affirmation rather than a full embrace of market economies. Justice does not require sameness but does demand structural changes when there is income disparity, an emphasis on consumption and celebration of wealth.

Using this lens, the increasing power of multinational enterprises is problematic. Professor Stackhouse recognizes this issue but argues that their power is being balanced by new host country laws, citizen movements and emerging international institutions. In reality, the exercise of newly concentrated power in the hands of few executives has been both positive and negative. The “race to the bottom” with its search for even lower wages throughout the world has devastated several communities in both developed and developing countries. Continuing evidence about shoddy factory conditions and abused workers highlights the misuse of power by corporate owners and the lack of concern by corporate buyers. Christian justice does not require an equalization of power but does demand a system of checks and balances as well as policies, codes and laws that protect all employees.

We are left with two major questions. Is globalization changing market systems so they meet the needs of all rather than a few? Is globalization changing the MNE so that it wields power more justly? The evidence of the transforming power of a gracious God in both arenas is still open for debate. Perhaps combining the skepticism of justice and the promise of grace would provide a fuller Christian perspective on globalization.

D. Jeffrey Lenn is Professor of Strategic Management and Public Policy in the School of Business at George Washington University, and is an Elder at the Old Presbyterian Meeting House in Alexandria, VA.