

Special Forum: An Ethical Imperative of Open Access

Why Christian Ethics Impels Open-Access Publishing

by Michael Robert Smith

The expansive world of publishing is beginning a transformation that promises an increase in global access to information and the possibility of a tectonic shift for traditional publishing models. Open-access publishing may be the wave of the future. Although it may cause negative externalities for traditional publishing models, Christians should rejoice and support the coming changes.

This brief note will first succinctly define open access (OA), will second flesh out a classic model of Christian ethics, will third discuss the potential positive and negative impacts of OA, and will finally conclude with a call for Christian academics, publishers, librarians, and the like to join the band of those championing the move to OA.

A. OPEN ACCESS OVERVIEW

OA publications are concisely defined as “digital, online, free of charge, and free of most copyright and licensing restrictions” (Suber 2012, 4). Underneath this broader OA umbrella, some literature is referred to as Gold, while others are termed Green. Gold OA describes articles published solely in a format and forum immediately accessible for public consumption and use (Stevens, Sandaver, and James 2018, 86). Green OA describes articles first published in a subscription-based journal, then later provided to a freely accessible repository (Stevens, Sandaver, and James 2018, 85). Ultimately, all OA scholarship, whether Green or Gold, is freely available for anyone to access, read, quote, copy, and distribute (Avery 2018, 12). The trend towards increasing OA publishing thus represents a trend toward increased access to scholarly and scientific information to more significant numbers of people worldwide, with fewer barriers to access.

B. CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Unlike Aristotelian teleological virtue ethics, which defines the good as acting in accordance with reason (the human telos), or Kantian deontological ethics, which defines the good as the fulfillment of a duty (focusing on the action over and above the result), Christian ethics begins with the fundamental suppositions that [1] God, who is good (1 Chron. 16:34; Ps. 25:8; Ps. 145:9; Mark 10:18; Ps. 34:8), is sovereign over the entire universe (Ps. 135:6; Ps. 115:3; Isa. 46:10; Dan. 4:35; 1 Chron. 16:31), that [2] God has the authority to define right and wrong (Ps. 50; Prov. 14:12), that [3] we are accountable to God and should seek to please him in all that we do (Rom. 14:12; Matt. 12:36-37; Jer. 17:10; 2 Cor. 5:10; Gal. 6:2), and that [4] God has revealed his will for us in the scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 3:9; Heb. 4:12; John 14:26). Whereas secular ethics begins with humanity, Christian ethics begin with God.

Accepting the preceding and turning to the scriptures, we immediately find God’s moral law comes to us as a body of injunctions. The Bible is full of moral imperatives, ethical guidance, and commandments. For example, there are the 10 Commandments and the Deuteronomic Code in the

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Old Testament and the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament. Not all guidance is appropriate to all situations, and there is not enough room in this short article to raise, discuss, and consider all the moral laws handed down in scripture. Thus, we shall consider three ethical imperatives in scripture as fundamental and applicable to this discussion.

The first ethical imperative of foundational significance is found in the gospels, where Jesus sums up the law and the prophets (Matt. 22:40) by declaring that we are first and foremost to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind and that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:37-39; Mark 12:29-30). As we endeavor to love our neighbors, we are commanded to consider others more significant than ourselves (Phil. 2:3) and to imitate Christ in self-sacrifice (1 Pet. 2:21; John 13:34; 2 Cor. 3:18; 1 Cor. 11:1; 1 John 2:6).

The second ethical imperative of significance to this discussion is the great commission to share the good news to every nation around the globe; we are commanded to make disciples (Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8; Matt. 4:19-20). We are to be like a light on a hill, openly shining so that those around us can come to see the truth.

The third ethical imperative we should consider is the command in Genesis, pre-sin, to be good stewards of God's creation. God commanded us to take care of the plants and animals and to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28-29; Gen. 2:15; Luke 12:42-48). We are endowed with the responsibility to care for this world.

Ultimately, Christian ethics affirms that God is sovereign over our lives, that he has bought us at a price, and that we are to endeavor to follow his lead and his command in all that we do. Without question, we are to love God and our neighbors, share the good news, and be good stewards of God's creation. Each of these elements of Christian ethics informs our view of the advisability and goodness of the OA publishing revolution.

C. THE POSITIVES AND NEGATIVES OF OPEN ACCESS

Beginning by acknowledging the potential negative impacts, the most significant issue is that vendors who publish articles may need to transition to a new model for revenue to stay in business. This is not unusual in the history of humanity; with any changes to technology or business models, companies are forced, by market conditions, to adapt or shutter the doors. Still, there may be downstream consequences, including (1) possible cost-shifting from producers to consumers, and (2) that scholars without funding may have difficulties publishing. While these potentially negative externalities of OA must be considered, they may not be wholly unsurmountable problems, and they should be weighed against the potential positive impacts.

Some positive impacts of transitioning to OA include (1) reduced barriers to scholarly content for missionaries and Christian educators globally, (2) reduced expenses for students, (3) reduced burdens on librarians fulfilling interlibrary-loan (ILL) requests, (4) increased access to useful information to help underserved communities improve their circumstances, and (5) increased access to scholarly and professional publications that can help practitioners of countless professions around the world including medical workers, engineers, attorneys, accountants, authors, artists, and carpenters, to name but a few. Each potentially positive impact of transitioning to OA can be considered good based on the model of Christian ethics discussed above.

Reducing barriers to scholarly content aligns well with the Christian ethical imperatives to love our neighbors and share the good news. The more scholarly publications that missionaries, Christian educators, and even self-motivated Christians can access for free, the better it is for them as

they seek to deepen their knowledge and understanding of God, this beautifully complex, intricate universe he created, and his salvific plan.

Reducing expenses for students by ensuring their access to high-quality, peer-reviewed, cutting-edge information is also a worthy goal in line with Christian ethics. More students may be able to afford education, and fewer students may have to decide between sacrificing a meal or other necessities to afford their studies. In this manner, supporting open-access publishing can be a form of loving our neighbors and serving God through such love.

Cost savings from reduced ILL requests may ultimately allow for lower student tuition or additional resources in library budgets. Further, the ILL burden on the library staff at a Christian college, university, seminary, or other institution of higher learning is reduced in any meaningful measure. In that case, it means more time that the librarian has available to serve the patrons and students in other areas.

Finally, increased access to quality information for underserved communities around the globe can help them be better stewards of their farms, farmlands, animals, and other assets, thereby increasingly fulfilling the Christian ethical imperative to be good stewards of His creation.

Overall, when considering the possible negative impacts of OA against the potential positive impacts of OA, on balance, the potential for good seemingly outweighs the potential negative externalities.

D. A CALL FOR CHRISTIANS TO ENDORSE OA

In conclusion, while there will undoubtedly be negative externalities as the publishing world moves towards OA, such negative consequences pale compared to the great potential for good that comes with a move towards OA. Furthermore, the Christian who contemplates, appreciates and seeks to live in submission to and in compliance with the ethical dictates of our good God can and arguably should advocate for the hastened transition to a universal, decentralized, and global OA system. OA can help advance the spread of the good news, provide the ability for more of us to be good stewards of creation, and help Christians demonstrate and live out their love for others. May the good Lord guide and encourage your reflection on this area of opportunity and change, such that you may stand firm on what you are convicted is right.

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