

The Church's Response to Poverty

What does it mean to respond to poverty in a biblical manner? Should believers address poverty within their own resources, within the Church body, with or without government resources? Is money the key to solving poverty? These are all questions which are raised in addressing how Christians should respond to poverty. There are different responses to each of these questions within Christian circles, but I believe that the Bible points to the Church as definitely having a responsibility to care for the poor, physically, but also spiritually. If the government can work with the Church and allow the Church to function as commanded by Christ, then so be it. However, if the government hinders the Church from fully functioning as the Church should, then I think they need to work separately.

There are Christians, including Marvin Olasky, who feel that it is the Church's responsibility to address the needs of the poor, as the Church, and without the government which may hinder the Church's work (Westbrook, 2010). Other Christians, including Jim Wallis, won't deny that the Bible commands the Church to care for the poor. However, they also believe that the Church's resources are limited, and so the Church should work in conjunction with the government in order to have a greater resource pool from which to provide for the poor (Wallis, 2008).

Several issues are raised in response to this suggestion of the Church working with the government. It is true that resources to provide help can be increased with government assistance. But this raises the question of who's actually in control of what happens with that money or those resources. If the Church wants to use those government-provided resources in the name of Christ, the government may prohibit the spreading of the Gospel with government

funds. Some argue that this is still acceptable because the poor are being fed and clothed.

However, others argue that this only addresses physical needs, and does not address the ultimate issue beneath poverty: sin.

Because we live in a fallen world, bad things happen. Sin affects our daily lives so deeply. Poverty is one of the effects of a sinful humanity, whether directly or indirectly. Some end up impoverished due to their own sinful choices, such as squandering their money on drugs, or engaging in pre-marital sex. This may lead to a single mother who has not the time or energy to look after her child and work at the same time to provide for her child, therefore, resulting in homelessness. Obviously not all sin results in such drastic situations, but one can see how one's choices could have a direct impact on their living situation (Proverbs 13:8). One might be incredibly lazy and refuse to work, again, directly resulting in poverty. This is directly due to one's choices. The Bible speaks over and over again about laziness resulting in poverty (Proverbs 10:4, 6:10-11, 14:3, 28:19).

However, there are times when poverty falls on one who has been wise with their time and money, and their poverty is not a direct result of their own wrong choices. One man's sin may affect another. For example, one may be robbed and so end up with no money to pay bills or buy food, even though they worked hard. Christ commands us to help the poor. He also said, "The poor you will always have with you" (Mark 14:7). Even though believers help the poor, the poor will always be present. Sin will always be present until the Day of Judgment. No matter how much we help the poor, they will always exist. Does that mean we should not help the poor? Certainly not! But we need to address not only the symptoms of sin, (poverty) but the root of the issue (sin itself). People need Christ, not just a few extra dollars to pay for dinner tonight.

With that said, it can be seen that the Church needs to be highly involved in addressing the needs of the poor, and not just their material needs, but their spiritual needs as well. In the Bible, Christ commands believers to “defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:9), and those who help the poor are shown to be righteous and good (Acts 9:36, Proverbs 29:7). The Bible also teaches of Christ preaching the Gospel to the poor (Matthew 11:15, Luke 4:18) Jesus Himself is an example of not only providing physically for the poor, but also spiritually. He is our ultimate example and we need to emulate Him. We as Christians, therefore, have a responsibility to minister physically and spiritually to the poor, by virtue of His example and His commands to help the poor. Marvin Olasky argues that true compassion fills the “hole in the soul,” and only giving that is faith-based can offer that (Westbrook, 2010).

I think Jim Wallis was right in urging people, not to “restrict working towards social justice to people of faith,” because non-faith-based groups can have a tremendous effect on helping people (Wallis, Change.org, 2010). However, that does not negate the Church’s responsibility of caring for *all* the needs of the poor. The government has responsibilities outlined in the Bible, such as punishing the wrongdoer (Romans 13:4). The Church also has its responsibilities as outlined in the Bible, such as caring for the poor (Romans 15:26, Galatians 2:10, Luke 14:12-14). The poor need Christ, and the government is not expected to show Christ to them; that is the job of the Church. The Church cannot slack in its duty by only giving food or clothes to the poor and by denying them Christ.

I believe as individual believers, and as Christian families, we must address the needs of the poor. However, different opportunities to help arise if we work as a whole Church in the name of Christ, rather than just by ourselves, and so it is important that we work together. I don’t think anyone has qualms with believers functioning as a whole Church. However, now the

question is raised as to whether the Church is to work with the government or not in caring for the poor. The government definitely has many more resources than the Church does. As long as the government is open to the Church's work as the Church, not just caring for physical needs, but also for spiritual needs, then I see no problem in the Church working with the government.

On the other hand, if the government agrees to work with the Church in caring for the poor, but with the stipulation that their resources are not used to preach the Gospel, then I see this as a problem. As we've discussed, part of the Church's job is to help meet the physical needs of the poor. But the root of the issue, and the more important part, is the preaching of the Gospel. Physical needs are very real, and to try to preach the Gospel without addressing physical needs is not seen as modeled by Christ. We cannot, nor should we, ignore physical needs. However, as the Church, we cannot ignore spiritual needs either. If the government is calling us to ignore the spiritual needs of the poor while addressing their physical needs, then we need to re-tune our hearts to the higher calling of Christ to address *all* their needs. What makes the Church the Church is that we are followers of Christ and we live to make Him known. We cannot allow a small good (government resources that meet temporal needs) to hinder our greater calling as a Church (making the Gospel of Christ known, often through meeting physical needs).

One might argue that the Church may have more opportunities to meet the spiritual needs if they can better meet physical needs. I agree. Therefore, if the government resources can help the Church meet more physical needs, we should utilize those, that we might increase our opportunities to witness. If the government allows us to use its resources and preach the Gospel, I believe we should use those opportunities. My point is, however, that if the government provides the Church with resources to help the poor, but hinders the Gospel, the Church should

not be a part of that. We should then work with the resources the Church has, with the faith that God will use those resources to make Himself known.

I do want to stress, however, that God can make Himself known even without the Church directly preaching the Gospel. Therefore, it is not right to say that God cannot or will not use government resources to bring glory to Himself. Individual believers or small groups of Christians may be in a position to use resources from the government to help the poor, even if they cannot preach the Gospel directly. However, the Church, by its very nature, is the Body of Christ, and needs to represent Christ in what it does. Therefore, I think it is imperative that the Church operates under that name of the Body of Christ, ministering to the whole person, and not under the name of the government. Although believers are part of the Body of Christ, they do not carry the title of the Church, and therefore, can be in different positions to minister than the Church as a whole can.

If the purpose of the Church is to love Christ by obeying His commands (1 John 5:3), and to glorify His name, making Him known (Matthew 28:19), and drawing others to Him, then I believe that what the Church's response to poverty should be is clear. The Church *must* address poverty. However, addressing poverty as the Church, in the name of Christ, meets physical needs, as well as spiritual needs. If the government can help provide the Church resources to minister both to the physical needs and the spiritual needs of the poor, then glory be to God, and let the Church work with the government. However, if the government is willing to provide resources to only meet the physical needs of the poor, and hinders the Church from functioning as the Church in spreading the Gospel, then the Church should not accept those government resources.

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