

Faith-Based Government Funding

The question before us in this faculty forum and in Christian ministry for our day is this: “Is accepting government funds consistent with ‘faith-based’ ministries?” The issue has been forced by the Bush Administration’s initiative to lead the Federal government to partner with faith-based groups as “Armies of Compassion.” President Bush has stated

The indispensable and transforming work of faith-based and other charitable service groups must be encouraged. Government cannot be replaced by charities, but it can and should welcome them as partners. We must heed the growing consensus across America that successful government social programs work in fruitful partnership with community-serving and faith-based organizations—whether run by Methodists, Muslims, Mormons, or good people of no faith at all.¹

This commitment leaves most Bible-believing Christians with mixed feelings.

The issue is not a simplistic one. It is complicated by the fact that the President who has initiated the impulse in the direction of government funding for faith-based ministries and the political party to which he belongs champion conservative family and religious values while most other leading political operatives do not. Consequently, politically conservative Baptists and those like them, who probably overwhelmingly voted for George W. Bush in the 2000 election, are in a quandary over this question. On one hand, the President is applauded with respect to his positive attitudes about the value of faith-based organizations to minister to the needs of people in our country. Many concerned citizens have complained that the current government-based attempts to deal with poverty are not nearly as efficient as faith-based organizations and other non-profit groups who more often and more consistently get the needed assistance directly into the hands of the people who need it. The billions of dollars appropriated from American taxpayers to help persons of limited income, in this analysis, actually ends up going to the “poverty industry—bureaucrats, caseworkers, service providers, and a grab-bag of vendors in the private sector who plan, implement, and evaluate social programs on government contracts.”² Therefore, why not give those groups that have a better reputation for success a crack at the problems that plague us?

On the other hand, dangers lurk always in the background, if not in the foreground. Some will reject the very idea as a violation of the Church’s mission. The average pastor or ministry leader may also wonder if the old adage is true that “with government shekels come government shackles.” Will there even be a place for those ministries who believe in a holistic outreach involving both physical and spiritual needs? Furthermore, in the words of John Greening, “there is the problem of the proverbial camel pushing its nose into the tent. Before long there would be lots of government but

¹ George W. Bush, Foreword to “Rallying the Armies of Compassion,” <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/reports/faithbased.html>; accessed September 8, 2001.

² Charles Murray, Preface to *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, by Marvin Olasky (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1992), xiii.

little ministry.”³ The relationship between the government and faith-based groups such as churches may be affected for a long time based upon what transpires in this particular social experiment by the Bush Administration. Consequently, participation must be well thought out and responses crafted with the wisdom of God.⁴

In the following analysis, I will deal with the issue from several vantage points expressed here as questions: (1) Is such an idea consistent with the laws of the United States, including the fundamental design forged by our Founding Fathers in the Constitution; (2) Is such an idea consistent with the Baptist position of separation of Church and State; (3) Is there a theology of the poor that would suggest that the Church needs to be involved in the goals of such an enterprise as the normal course of its work; (4) If there is a “yes” answer to the previous questions, there remains the troublesome issue of whether it is wise to implement such government funding for faith-based ministries in our day.

The Constitution and United States Law

Modern times in American history have witnessed a shift toward a more hostile posture with respect to religious institutions, especially those that advocate belief in absolute truth.⁵ Judge Robert Bork summarizes the situation well:

Some of the most acute observers have thought that religion is essential to the health of American culture and, perhaps, to the survival of our democratic institutions. Most of these commentators viewed religion as the basis of morality, which is fundamental to all else. It is significant, then, that religion was seen as secure and central to American life in the nineteenth century but has appeared increasingly problematic and peripheral in the twentieth.⁶

³ John Greening, “Government Funding for Faith-based Groups?” *Baptist Bulletin* 66 (May 2001): 5.

⁴ In the debate two decades or so ago, there was the encouraging of Christian social action from those like Ronald Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977). Criticisms were many including that of Ronald Nash who argued the following way: “Sider’s book typifies the approach that many contemporary Christians take toward social problems. There is no question about the fact that they care. But their compassion is often wedded to a political and economic ideology that is long on heart and short on wisdom. The emotional side of Christian social concern—loving and caring—is only half the story. The best of intentions cannot actually aid the poor unless channeled into actions that are informed by sound economic theory and practice. When ‘aid’ is grounded on bad economics, it will usually make any bad situation worse” (*Social Justice and the Christian Church* [Milford, Michigan: Mott Media, 1983], 3). We do not want to repeat similar mistakes in our analysis of the present situation and proposals.

⁵ See the pertinent analysis by D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 13-54.

⁶ Robert H. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (New York: Regan Books, 1996), 272.

This shift in the view of religion in general and Christianity in particular has coincided with a similar change in the way that the founding documents and laws of our nation have been interpreted. Conservatives often do not accept the totality of the change, while political liberals applaud it.⁷

An example of these conflicting opinions was seen in the presidential debates in the Fall of 2000. The conservative George W. Bush pledged to nominate judges to the Supreme Court who believed in the Constitution of the United States as written and who would not invent new laws by means of a revisionist interpretation of the document. On the other side was the liberal Al Gore who affirmed his belief that the Constitution was a “living, breathing document” whose meaning changes over time.⁸ In other words, any set of present-day judges have the right to read into the document their own current values which may or may not have anything to do with what the original framers of the document had intended.

One of my favorite words in this debate is the word *penumbra*. The word carries the idea of a *partial shade* or *shadow*, *obscurity*, *uncertainty*, or *cloudiness*. It was apparently first used in a formal sense in *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965).⁹ In this court case, the U. S. Supreme Court struck down a state statute that forbid the counseling of someone to use contraceptives.¹⁰ The way that the argument was drawn set the stage for *Roe v. Wade* (1973) in which the justices were able to “find” within the emanations flowing from the text an umbrella wide enough to include the so-called right of a woman to abort her unborn child. David Barton comments forcefully on this argument:

The means used by the Judiciary to increase its scope of power is to judge laws according to the “spirit,” or what it calls the “penumbra,” or shadow, of the Constitution. This has enabled the Judiciary to impute any meaning it wishes to the Constitution, resulting in the

⁷ It is important to understand that conservatives are not anti-change. They simply believe that societal change should for the most part come about naturally. In other words, most change should not be artificially induced by a cultural elite, which is attempting to engineer society from the top down. This latter approach, which is the approach of modern political liberalism, has a bent toward the putting down of both tradition and liberty. That is why it is so despised by conservatives. For a detailed discussion of these definitional issues, see the classic work by Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, 7th rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishers, 2001). This latest edition is to be reissued in September 2001.

⁸ Judge Robert Bork gives a compelling response to such thinking (*The Tempting of America: The Political Seduction of the Law* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990], 167-70). He notes: “The notion of a ‘living Constitution’ seems to appeal to a great many people, possibly because the phrase makes it seem that the alternative is a ‘dead Constitution.’ Indeed, I have no difficulty with the idea of a Constitution that lives, only with the notion that it keeps sprouting new heads in accordance with current intellectual and moral fashion” (167).

⁹ *Griswold v. Connecticut* 381 U.S. 479 (1965); See also David Barton, *Original Intent: The Courts, the Constitution, and Religion*, 3rd ed. (Aledo, TX: Wallbuilder Press, 2000), 261-62.

¹⁰ William A. Stanmeyer, “Restoring the Faith of the Founders” in *Restoring the Constitution: Is Judicial Activism Destroying the Constitution*, edited by H. Wayne House (Dallas, TX: Probe Books, 1987), 22-27.

creation of brand new constitutional “rights” which reflect not the will of the people but rather the personal values and prejudices of the judges.¹¹

Biblical scholars from within the vantage point of their own discipline should recognize immediately that such handling of a document by judicial activists is nothing less than allegorical interpretation as opposed to the conservative view of the document which insists on grammatical-historical or literal interpretation.

However, what does this debate have to do with the issue before us? Its significance lies in the fact that one must decide which interpretive method to use for the U. S. Constitution before he tackles the question of the legality of President Bush’s proposal. This is especially crucial since the government gives mixed signals with a divided Supreme Court, Congress, and Executive Branch contributing to the confusion. It is also true because the shift from literal to non-literal interpretation of the Constitution within American history is partly to blame for the rise of anti-religious rulings by the courts. That is, the shift has fostered the idea of an *absolute* “wall of separation” between church and state in our country, a concept which present Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, William Rehnquist, has called a “misleading metaphor.”¹² For the sake of this presentation, it will be assumed that the grammatical-historical interpretation of the U. S. Constitution is to be desired much for the same reasons that the Bible should be interpreted in such a manner.¹³ The analysis below will assume this position.

There are several lines of evidence that suggest that the Founding Fathers believed that there was no *absolute* wall of separation between Church and State that should keep the church out of public policy discussions and away from involvement in areas of culture which the government touched. Since the 1940s, the U. S. Courts have increasingly used a rather recent (allegorical) interpretation of the First Amendment to impose the view of absolute separation of Church and State in our culture. However, to the contrary, the Founding Fathers encouraged the preferential treatment of Christianity but did not want any particular denomination to be preferred over others at the national level. States were allowed to decide for themselves if any particular religion was to be established at that level.

- Article VI, paragraph 3, of the Constitution actually requires the taking of an oath or affirmation before taking public office while at the same time prohibiting a religious test for the office.¹⁴ Belief in God in the context of the time of the

¹¹ Barton, *Original Intent*, 261-62.

¹² *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 92 (1984), Rehnquist, J. (dissenting). Barton cites this opinion by Rehnquist (*Original Intent*, 43).

¹³ For a discussion of the role of literal hermeneutics in Bible interpretation, see Mike Stallard, “Literal Interpretation, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 1 (Spring 1997): 5-36, and “Literal Interpretation: The Key to Understanding the Bible” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 4 (Spring 2000): 14-35.

¹⁴ The actual wording is “The Senators and Representatives before mentioned, and the members of the several State legislatures, and all executive and judicial offices both of the United States and of the

Founders was inherently part of taking an oath.¹⁵ The framers of the Constitution thought that belief in God was a necessary part of serving the nation while no distinction was to be made between the various denominations.

- The early passing of the significant Northwest Ordinance in 1787 during the First Congress demonstrated the Federal Government's willingness to give financially to the development of schools in the Northwest Territories. What is especially interesting is a statement contained within the actual ordinance: "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of learning shall forever be encouraged."¹⁶ The significant and even *necessary* role that religion played in assisting the government is clearly expressed. What is especially interesting here is that it is this same Congress, which hammered out the detailed wording of the First Amendment with its establishment clause.¹⁷ If the modern absolutists with respect to separation are correct, then one must assume that these men are quite unable to rub two thoughts together, a verdict that simply cannot be laid at the feet of that generation or group of men.
- James Madison, who has been used as an early Founder who taught the absolute wall of separation of Church and State, was actually on the congressional committee during the First Congress, which recommended a chaplain for the House of Representatives.¹⁸ This is a telling act since the "200 year practice of paid chaplains in legislatures, many prisons, and in the armed forces prove conclusively that taxes have been levied to support religious activities."¹⁹
- The administration of President Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809), probably the Founder most often invoked to support an absolute wall of separation of Church and State, gives quite a bit of evidence that disproves that he believed in such an interpretation of the First Amendment.
 - Jefferson forged a treaty with the Kaskaskia Indians, which was forwarded to the Senate for ratification. The treaty contained a proposal for the use

several States, shall be bound by oath or affirmation to support this Constitution; but no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States." The statement is quite broad even applying to the states.

¹⁵ Barton, *Original Intent*, 39.

¹⁶ Cited in Stanmeyer, "Restoring the Faith," 28.

¹⁷ Barton, *Original Intent*, 41.

¹⁸ Stanmeyer, "Restoring the Faith," 28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

of federal money to support a Roman Catholic priest and erect a church building for use in evangelizing and teaching the Indians.²⁰

- Prior to Jefferson's presidency, the Fourth Congress in 1796 gave land to help support the United Brethren in sharing the gospel among the heathen, by which was meant primarily the Indians. Jefferson himself signed several renewals of this act during his presidency.²¹

These samples are only a few of those that are available in the actual historical records. However, they are sufficient to show that during the era of the Founding Fathers, the First Amendment was not used to build an absolute wall of separation between Church and State. In fact, the government had been proactive in endorsing and supporting, even financially, many religious activities including evangelism. Consequently, I conclude that one cannot reject on legal grounds George Bush's proposal to fund faith-based organizations for social purposes. Quite to the contrary, it is possible to view the judicial activism beginning in the 1940s, which has fostered a negative spirit toward the relationship of Church and State, as illegal. Rather than use the supplied constitutional system with its method of amendment, the Court has actually invented new law through allegorical interpretation of its supreme text.

The Baptist View of Separation of Church and State

Modern Baptists who are politically conservative might be surprised to learn that Thomas Jefferson first used the term "wall of separation between Church and State" in a letter of encouragement to the Danbury Baptist Association (January 1, 1802) which had expressed concerns that the First Amendment would actually be used to curtail religious liberty.²² In modern times, their concerns have been realized. Nonetheless, among Baptists, the belief in the separation of Church and State has been cited as one of their cherished distinctives.²³ It is even possible to attribute the passing of the Bill of Rights, including the First Amendment, in some degree to prominent Baptists such as Isaac Backus in Massachusetts and John Leland in Virginia.²⁴

The biblical justification for a form of separation of Church and State that is often given to support the doctrine has several threads. First, the idea of *distinct spheres* for Church and State is deduced in principle from statements by Christ and from apostolic

²⁰ Ibid., 28.

²¹ Ibid., 29.

²² See Barton, *Original Intent*, 43-48.

²³ Donald K. Anderson and David M. Gower, *The Biblical Distinctives of Baptists* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1992), 102-110.

²⁴ See Robert Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, 3rd ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1963), 234-43.

experience. For example, Jesus teaches in Matthew 22:21 that one should “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things which are God’s.” This often-used statement, in context, refers specifically to the paying of taxes, which Jesus affirms His followers should do. However, the point of application for the issue at hand is that Jesus makes a distinction between obligations to government and responsibilities to God. In the latter case, further application is made to the work of the Church, which for this dispensational age involves one primary expression of our duties. While this passage in Matthew is pre-Pentecost (and therefore pre-Church), it must be noted that it occurs in a section of Matthew that has moved from God’s rejection of the Jews to the anticipatory Gentile mission which concerns the Church.²⁵

Another teaching that is used in this arena is Jesus’ statement given to Pilate in John 18:36: “My kingdom is not of this world.” The context is Jesus’ trial before Pilate leading up to His crucifixion. Pilate’s concern is the accusation that Jesus claimed to be King of the Jews. Jesus seems, on the surface, to be affirming a distinction between the nature of His kingdom and the political kingdom of which Pilate was a part. While Baptists have often used this to support an idea similar to Matthew 22:21, here it is problematic. Christ’s kingdom has earthly, political, and national ramifications and thus does not really seem much different in form from other governments seen from that perspective (e.g., Is. 9:6-7; Dan. 2, 7; Lk. 1:32-33). If one rushes to emphasize the spiritual as opposed to a concrete ethnic nature of the kingdom because of Christ’s words, he will struggle with another saying that Jesus gave: “I (Jesus) am not of this world” (John 8:23). Certainly, Jesus was concretely present in the world when He made that assertion. Thus, one cannot deny the literal, ethnic, political nature of Christ’s kingdom on the basis of John 18:36. It is probably best not to use this text in a discussion of the separation of Church and State.²⁶ To do so seems to equate the Church with the Kingdom, which is an amillennial and unbiblical construct.

Apostolic example and teaching also leads one to consider the nature of two distinct spheres called Church and State. For example, Paul in Romans 13:1-7 teaches that government officials are ministers of God, albeit of a different kind than church saints. Paul also encourages those in the Church to pray for government officials and appears to treat them as if they have a role distinct from the Church (see 1 Tim. 2:2). However, a stronger case can be made from the example of Peter and John who refused to obey a command from governing authorities to quit preaching in Jesus’ name (Acts. 5:17-29). They noted “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts. 5:29). The preaching of the gospel of Christ, which was part of the duty of the Church (Matt. 28:19-20), could not be officially stopped by the existing political rulers. In essence, this forces a measure

²⁵ The dispensational understanding that the Church starts on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 is assumed in this presentation. However, one could argue that the anticipatory phase of Jesus’ earthly ministry contains within it the initial gathering of souls with which to start the Church formally at a later time.

²⁶ Earl Radmacher discusses Martin Luther’s appeal to John 18:36 to emphasize the spiritual nature of the kingdom (*The Nature of the Church*, reprint ed. [Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing Co., 1996], 60). My point here is not that Jesus makes no distinction. On the face of it, He is at least highlighting the heavenly source for His kingdom. I am simply affirming that one cannot arbitrarily rule out an earthly, political kingdom on the basis of Jesus’ words in this passage.

of distinction or separation between Church and State by highlighting different spheres of authority.

Perhaps the strongest argument for a separation between Church and State is an *appeal to dispensational theology and the post-Pentecost apostolic model for the Church*. Those church groups that tend to emphasize a merger of Church and State, such as the Roman Catholic Church, would have an easier time if they could legitimately appeal to Old Testament texts as a model. In that part of the canon, an elaborate priesthood tied more closely to the organization of the nation can be seen in the development of God's people Israel. However, in the post-Pentecost picture of the Church, we see God's people doing the work of God while being entirely separate from the Roman Empire. Caesar does not choose church leaders. Church leaders do not choose Caesar. There is no close tie whatsoever. On the face of it, the way things work as presented in the apostolic model for Church (outlined in Acts and the Epistles) involves a distinction between Church and State.

The doctrine of separation of Church and State is also deduced quite frequently in Baptist writings from the idea of *individual soul liberty and the priesthood of every believer*. An application is made that the individual does not need any government or national involvement in his religious affairs.²⁷ His relationship to God is, so to speak, one to one, needing no mediation by a structured priesthood or by government authorities. Again, this is seen as distinct from the Old Testament model of Israel where there is a closer tie (although there are distinctions) between civil authorities and the religious functions of the nation.

The priesthood of every believer, which highlights this individual ability to deal with God directly rather than through a mediated priesthood, is often based upon the proof-text of 1 Peter 2:9 ("But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light"). It is true that this passage appears to be applied by Peter to all Church Age believers. However, it is a quotation from Exodus 19:6 where the direct application is made to the nation of Israel. If one wants to use Peter's application to suggest a universal priesthood without a mediation of any kind like in the Old Testament, he must address how the Old Testament use of it allows for a universal application of the priesthood idea to Israelites while at the same time maintaining the distinctive Levitical priesthood functions.

Perhaps a better way to address this question is to appeal to (1) the teaching of Hebrews and (2) the body imagery used by the Apostle Paul. The writer of Hebrews argues that the Church Age believer has direct access to God and even is commanded to come *boldly* to the throne of grace in time of need (Heb. 4:16). The direct unmediated position of the believer is heightened later in the book when he is declared to be the object of a ministry of intercession by Christ, Who has a better priesthood than the Levitical priesthood under the Old Covenant (Heb. 7). More could also be said from this book which we do not have the space to cover. The bottom line is that the portrait of the

²⁷ J. L. M. Curry, Introduction to *The History of the Baptists*, Vol. 1, by Thomas Armitage (New York: Bryan, Taylor, & Co., 1887; reprint ed., Minneapolis, MN: James and Klock Christian Publishing Co., 1977), vii-xii.

believer's relationship to Christ places him in an unmediated position of greater enablement than his counterpart in pre-Pentecost days.

The body imagery coming out of Pauline theology is perhaps clearer in its teaching. While distinction of roles is allowed within the body (e.g., Eph. 4:11), the entire depiction is based upon the concept of a unity wherein every member of the body has equal importance as God grants grace to each one (see especially 1 Cor. 12). Whether it is the picture of the believer in Hebrews or in Paul's body imagery, one thing is certain. Neither one is explained within the context of national factors.

So, in light of the summary cited above, one can begin to flesh out the biblical and Baptist doctrine of separation of Church and State. However, there are hints in the text that suggest that such separation does not mean hostility between the two. Interaction appears to be possible and perhaps desired rather than isolation. At one level, Paul appealed to his Roman citizenship to keep free and advance the gospel when it suited his purpose (Acts 16:36-39; 22:22-29). Two New Testament books, Luke and Acts, are probably addressed to a government official named Theophilus.²⁸ Moreover, the book of Acts has credibly been taken in part as a historical apologetic for Christianity within the Roman Empire.²⁹ Thus, it is hard to press an extreme absolutist distinction so that there is no interaction between the two spheres of influence of Church and State.

In fact, one could argue that such interaction is desirable if there are common goals involved. No one should complain if biblical churches are cooperating with government agencies during the emergency after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York City. However, a regular ongoing plan of action where the two are cooperating might be another story. There are examples in Scripture of governments either taking care of the poor (Gen. 41) or being judged for not taking care of the poor (Is. 3:14-15; Ez. 16:49-50; Dan. 4:25-27; Amos 2:6ff). There are, of course, many more passages concerning the poor that are not explicitly national in character (but relative to individuals) and even some of the ones listed above could be debated. However, there are enough to suggest that there are times when goals in harmony with Scripture and common to both Church and State can be seen.

However, even if there is a biblical legitimizing of interaction between Church and State, while maintaining the separate spheres as biblically outlined, one must be cautious. There is no Scriptural example of direct government funding for the work of the Church, either corporately or as individual believers. Instead, offerings for the poor came through the people in the churches and not by government sponsorship (Acts 4:34-37; 6:1-7; Gal. 2:10; I Cor. 16:1-3; 2 Cor. 8:1-24). While the normativeness of the methods for these historical occasions can be debated, the Baptist tendency to mimic the New Testament as closely as possible in all matters must be taken into consideration. The weight of this argument seems to be sufficient to suggest that the Church should keep its work in this area reasonably separate from the State's. The Church can possibly see itself as serving the goals of the State as it assists when necessary, but its overall funding probably needs to come primarily from within.

²⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 98.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 23-25.

A Theology of the Poor

Another area must be settled theologically before faith-based ministries can accept government funds. While earlier examples showed that the early days of the United States saw the government providing funds for specific sectarian groups for evangelism and teaching, especially with respect to Indians, George Bush's proposal is not at all in that direction. The targeted use of funds is in the social arena, that is, the helping and assisting of the poor or of those in need of counseling and training of some kind relative to "secular" aspects of living. In other words, the churches and ministry groups must decide if such work is within the scope of their mission. I heard Leighton Ford once give this story to illustrate the dilemma: One local church (conservative) across the street from another church [which it considered liberal because of its social gospel emphasis] put up a large sign which read: "A BODY WITHOUT A SOUL IS A CORPSE!" The other church responded with its own sign: "A SOUL WITHOUT A BODY IS A GHOST!" To what extent should Christian churches and ministries be involved in social engagement in our day?

Robert Pyne claims that evangelical churches (and churches of all stripes) were much more involved in social activism of some kind in the United States until the era of the Depression.³⁰ There, a great shift took place, as the government became the source that handled the social and economic needs of people. People stopped looking to the Church for help. At about the same time, the modernist-fundamentalist controversy was in battle mode. This conflict left the Bible-believing Christians without those parts of the Bible that dealt with social needs. Instead, there was a focus on individual redemption and the supernatural teachings of the Bible. On the other hand were the liberals, who had rejected the supernatural, but maintained the ethical teachings of Jesus, which included the assisting of the poor. From this emphasis came a concentration on redemption of society or what has come to be called the social gospel.

There is no question that the gospel of eternal life is primary in the mission of the Church (Matt. 28, Eph. 4). However, there is much biblical evidence to suggest that to fully follow the heart of God one must also have an interest in those unfortunate and downtrodden souls with respect to this life.³¹ The following list of passages with occasional discussion shows that God's heart in this matter has not changed through the dispensations.

³⁰ Robert Pyne, "The New Man in an Immoral Society: Expectations Between the Times," (Paper delivered at the Dispensational Study Group of the Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting, 1997); See also Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, with Preface by Charles Murray (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1992), 221.

³¹ Besides the works listed in other notes, I recommend these works, some older and some recent, to be of help to think through these issues: Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996); Art Beals, *Beyond Hunger: A Biblical Mandate for Social Responsibility* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1985); Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, Vol. 4, reprint ed., (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1999), 522-54.

Mosaic Legislation Concerning the Poor

- Note the theological implications of the image of God in man in Gen. 1:26-28
- Ex. 21:2; 22:22ff; 23:3, 6, 10, 11
- Lev. 19:9-10; 23:22
- Deut. 15:4-11; 24:12

Principles in Proverbs

14:31 He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker, but he who is gracious to the needy honor Him.

19:17 He who is gracious to a poor man lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his good deed.

21:13 He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor, will also cry himself and not be answered.

22:23 Do not rob the poor because he is poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the LORD will plead their case, and take the life of those who rob them.

29:7 The righteous is concerned for the rights of the poor; the wicked does not understand such concern.

31:20 She [the virtuous woman] extends her hand to the poor; and she stretches out hands to the needy.

Ezekiel's Understanding of Sodom and Gomorrah

One of the most fascinating passages in the book of Ezekiel is the comparison of the sins of Jerusalem and Judah to Sodom and Gomorrah, which God gives through the prophet to the exiled community in Babylon:

Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen (Ez. 16:49-50)

The historical account of God's dealings with Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18-19) speaks of God's anger against their grievous sin, which is given in general terms in chapter eighteen. However, in chapter nineteen the focus is placed on moral perversion of the worst sort. Nothing is said about Sodom's treatment of the poor. Yet Ezekiel's later revelation indicates that this is also part of the reason that God destroyed Sodom. To be sure, Ezekiel's statement allows for moral perversion as part of the detestable things with which He was angry. Ezekiel's version does not diminish the idea of moral perversion in the account, but it does show a broader picture of God's dealings. It would seem that the

culture of Sodom was self-indulgent which led to both moral perversion and the mistreatment of the poor. In this way, overlooking the poor is elevated to the level of moral perversion rather than moral perversion being lowered to the level of not taking care of the poor.

The Synoptic Gospels

- Matthew 6:19-34; 19:16-21; 25:31-46
- Mark 4:19; 10:24; 14:7
- Luke 4:18 (Isa. 61:1-2); 6:20-30; 7:41; 12:16-21, 25, 31-34; 16:19-31

The Book of Acts

Acts 2:44-46; 4:32-5:11

The Epistles of Paul

- Gal. 2:10, 6:10; 2 Cor. 8; Phil. 4:11, 12; 2 Thess. 3:7-10; I Tim. 6:7-10, 17-19

The Teaching of James

- James 1:9-11, 27; 2:2-6, 15-17; 5:1-6

Conclusion: The Application of Wisdom

In the previous discussions, we have seen that God's tender heart for the poor is consistently the same regardless of the dispensation. Therefore, churches and individual believers in the present age need to be involved in assisting the poor and needy. We had earlier come to the conclusion that there is nothing illegal, that is, contrary to the U. S. Constitution, if government funds are funneled into churches or religious groups. Even the doctrine of the separation of Church and State can be construed in a non-absolutist way so that cooperation can exist between the two institutions without doing damage to their spheres of influence as ordained by God. However, we were hesitant to engage regularly in that practice as it pertains to meeting social needs in the country in light of the biblical modeling of how the Church in the New Testament took care of the poor.

Beyond these areas one must consider the possibility that, even if the legal and theological conclusions allow for the government funding of faith-based ministries, it is clear that such conclusions do not force faith-based ministries to participate in this approach. Therefore, one must also decide if, in this particular case, it is a wise practice to undertake. Several areas of consideration come to mind:

1. We must deal with the government laws *de facto* as well as *de jure*, that is, with what is the real state of affairs and not just what is legally right.³² We must take into account the way most of the governmental agencies execute the laws and not just what is legal by Constitutional standards. While it is true that government funding of faith-based groups does not violate the Constitution or the practice of the Founding Fathers, many view it that way. As a result, the proposal of government funding for faith-based groups may simply be the opening of the door for a new avenue of litigation, which in the end will only please lawyers.
2. There is also the concern that such a partnership will lead to government encroachment upon the affairs of the churches.³³ There has been a tendency in modern times for our government to expand in the areas it touches. Such expansion leaves the door open for abuse of the partnership in ways that would be negative for the Church.
3. Bureaucratic methods of policy requirements and accounting would also create a potential problem.³⁴ From my days in the aerospace industry, I discovered that government regulations constantly make a simple task a mountain to climb. The red tape and added policies may take extra workers on the part of the church just to police the various activities and do the necessary reporting. While no biblical church or believer wants to minimize the necessity to be accountable, our government's penchant for overkill in this area may not be the most effective use of church or ministry workers.
4. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the Bush proposal is that it clearly separates the social from the spiritual. Faith based ministries will only be funded for "secular" social assistance – food for the poor, counseling, etc. Furthermore, the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives which is being set up to administer this program prescribes activities to be covered as "faith-neutral" while the entire oversight group is an interfaith assembly of leaders. On the surface, this has a noble ring to it. However, the biblical Christian knows that it is not so easy to separate the social or secular from the spiritual. No one, according to the proposal, should give a cup of water to anyone "in the name of Jesus." In other words, faith-based groups will not be able to tell the people they help why they are helping them in the first place other than a few pious platitudes about loving each other. In addition, the entire enterprise will lock out those ministries who believe in a holistic approach. If it is true that social and spiritual needs cannot be

³² This does not mean that we should give up trying to influence people to accept the legitimacy of a literal interpretation of the U. S. Constitution and all that flows from that within U. S. history. There have been several attempts along these lines among which is Jeffrey A. Aman and H. Wayne House, "Constitutional Interpretation and the Question of Lawful Authority" in *Restoring the Constitution: Is Judicial Activism Destroying the Constitution* (Dallas, TX: Probe Books, 1987), 193-211.

³³ This is one of John Greening's concerns, "Government Funding," 5.

³⁴ Ibid.

separated, then what happens if the Nation of Islam applies for and receives government funds? What criteria will be used for which groups make it and which do not? Furthermore, who is it that decides? I am not sure I want a government agency making such choices about religious groups for the long haul.

5. Another major concern is that the administration's proposal may lead to the strengthening of ecumenism. The above mentioned interfaith oversight group is a case in point. What is being set in motion is a dialog among different faiths which in the end could lead to an increased cooperation of groups in such a way that even a balanced and biblical view of ecclesiastical separation will be violated by all those participating. It appears that the well-intentioned idea of helping people in reality could be a slippery slope with negative consequences down the road.

When I began my particular thinking about this issue for the purpose of this paper, I was more positive about government funding of faith-based ministries. After reviewing these areas, I have come to question the wisdom of such an approach for churches although not for all nonprofit community organizations, even those run by individual Christians. The doctrine of the separation of Church and State, while allowing some cooperation between the two institutions, does not mandate such an approach. Furthermore, the practical areas of consideration (cited above) point to many problems that make participation an unwise choice. We may need to disagree in a loving way with many brothers in Christ who go that direction. We must also certainly support the motives, if not the means, of our President in this matter. However, the most important thing we need to do is the ongoing work of our churches, which includes caring for the poor, while we carry out our primary mission of proclaiming the gospel to the ends of the earth.