

The Gazette

Christian charities go astray in seeking government help

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Ahead of the G8 conference in Gleneagles, Scotland, this week, a spate of poverty-relief efforts have sprung up to huge public attention. The One Campaign has been the most prominent, supported by pop icons like Bono and George Clooney and Christian leaders like evangelical pastor Rick Warren.

But The One Campaign is just the headliner of a group of like-minded initiatives, most often identifying themselves with one biblical prophet or another (like the Micah Challenge and the Isaiah Platform). What is similar in all these movements is an emphasis on the role of government in providing assistance to the poor. But it is precisely this aspect of the initiatives that is most problematic from a Christian perspective.

One of the most common refrains from Christian leaders calling various governments to action is that governments are the only entities capable of providing the level of material assistance that is needed. In the words of a speaker to a denominational assembly promoting one of these campaigns last month, "Civil society is never enough." The message is that churches can never hope to match sums like the \$40 billion the G8 has proposed to cut debt among some African nations.

This attitude simply does not give Christians enough credit, both for what they have done and what they might do if challenged. In the U.S. alone in 2004, private individuals and corporations gave

a record \$249 billion to charity, with religious organizations as the single largest recipient group at \$88 billion.

This is more than double the debt relief offered by the G8, and this is reached even though Christians as a group do not give nearly at a level in accord with the biblical principle of the tithe. The Barna Group reports that only 6 percent of American Christians gave 10 percent of their income to churches or parachurch organizations in 2004. Imagine the possibilities if Christian leaders spent more time admonishing the members of their flock to meet their biblical responsibilities!

There's nothing inherently wrong with Christians attempting to hold governments accountable for the promises that they have made.

But the irony is that the entities with perhaps the most assets to spend on poverty relief (governments) are the ones that are least able to do so effectively. The secular nature of democracies, which vigorously separate "proselytizing" and faith elements out of charity work, is a serious hindrance to the efficacy of compassion.

This restriction prevents governments from addressing anything but the material needs of the poor. While Christianity has always recognized the rich and complex body and soul anthropology of the human person, secular governments only have the tools to enact part of the solution.

So why are Christians so eager to endorse what is at best a half measure? Jesus showed us the priority of the spiritual over the physical when he asked, "What

good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mark 6:36 NIV).

Some kinds of Christian charity have been making this error for decades. The National Council of Churches (NCC) ignores the fact that acts of Christian mercy must always be done with a view toward the spiritual welfare of the recipient, as it continually engages in relief efforts while explicitly condemning "proselytizing." But what the NCC calls proselytizing, other Christians call evangelism. Is not the "cup of water" to be given in Jesus' name? (Mark 9:41).

Richard Baxter, the famed 16th-century Puritan missiologist and theologian, once wrote, "Do as much good as you are able to men's bodies in order to the greater good of souls. If nature be not supported, men are not capable of other good." This accords well with both the biblical injunctions against neglecting the body in favor of the soul, or the soul in favor of the body.

A true vision of Christian charity is one that embraces the whole human person. In the same way that we cannot ignore material concerns in ministering to a person's spiritual needs, the service of the body must be done in view of the greater purpose of Christian missions: the salvation of souls. And this is something the government simply cannot do.

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