

Editorial: Meeting needs on three challenging fronts

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How should Christians go about meeting their neighbors' needs?

That question lies at the heart of this edition of the *Baptist Standard*. It's also a dispute older than Christianity itself. The prophets, particularly Amos, railed against well-off religious folks who scrupulously tended to the letter of the Law but overlooked the obvious suffering of people they encountered every day. Centuries later, the scribes and Pharisees repeatedly lambasted Jesus for taking care of outcasts and ne'er-do-wells at the expense of religious rules and regulations.



Editor Marv KnoxTwo thousand years later, we still don't agree. The lead article in this week's feature package, "[Meeting needs: How can Christians really help the poor?](#)" presents dueling perspectives offered by compassionate, well-meaning Christians.

On one hand, some Christians advocate a spiritual version of tough love. They disavow one-way support for needy people, citing dependency fostered by a welfare mentality. They reason the long-term solution to poverty and need is self-sufficiency.

In contrast, other Christians point to Jesus' model of unconditional love. They stress the necessity of taking immediate steps to feed the hungry,

house the homeless, clothe the naked and heal the sick. They realize millions of people suffer because of external conditions, which must be ameliorated and relieved.

Both/And

The most obvious answer to this dispute is both/and. Meeting needs requires tangible, immediate acts of compassion as well as discipline-instilling expectations for self-improvement and personal sufficiency.

That's why churches and other faith-based organizations work on a broad range of fronts. Especially in hard times like these, we need well-stocked food pantries and clothes closets. But we need tutoring programs to keep children in school and parenting classes to help moms and dads understand how they can raise their children in a competitive, education-based society. We need relief programs that provide rent- and utility-assistance. But we need mentoring and practical training programs to help people understand how to get and hold jobs. We need more GED classes and English-as-a-second-language programs.

But that's not enough, is it?

Advocate for the poor

If Christians hope to make a broad-based and lasting impact, we must advocate on behalf of the poor and powerless. We must demand quality education and economic justice for all people. We must correct social systems that perpetuate poverty. We must champion both private and public strategies that address all these problems on a scale churches and other faith groups cannot handle by themselves.

Of course, this is controversial. Americans divide over the nature and size of government. So, we similarly disagree over the focus and scope of our activity in the public square.

Some—ironically from both the extreme left and far right—decry the engagement of faith in public issues. The extreme left thinks “separation of church and state” means people of faith should have no voice in public policy. The far right believes government has no business doing “the church’s job” of looking after the poor. Both fallacies don’t hold up. Christians are citizens, too, and have a right to advocate for public policy. And poverty and need are so great, they’re beyond the means of the church alone to resolve.

Holding politicians accountable

The demand for people of grace and compassion to advocate for the common good never has been more obvious than in the past few weeks. The embarrassing and inconceivable stalemate in Washington illustrated why Americans must hold their politicians accountable. Rather than serving a political party and focusing on the next election, they must serve the greater good and focus on compromise and practical solutions to national need. They must recognize and respect our national heritage for protecting and caring for all people.

U.S. Christians could establish a binding moral imperative and a lasting positive legacy by bridging our national divide. What if Christian politicians—maybe Baptists, just to start—would stand up and say, “What we hold in common and value together is greater than political divisions that threaten to tear us apart”?

Christians cannot operate soup kitchens and jobs-training programs fast enough to heal America. We need unified Christian voices—from both the right and the left—demanding our so-called leaders strive for the common good.

Or God help us all.