

Sacrifice for the greater good in theory and practice

July 26, 2013

Christians tend to agree the Bible commands sacrifice for the greater good, but they differ about what that means.

In a July 18 letter to elected federal officials, 5,000 Christian leaders asked Congress to work to protect the most vulnerable in American society as they try to reduce the deficit.

✖ “Despite the months that have gone by since sequestration took effect, the stakes remain high for the millions of people in the United States and around the world who depend on the programs on the chopping block,” [Bread for the World](#) President David Beckmann reminded congressional leaders.

Prioritize the least among us

“I hope that Congress and the administration can prioritize the least among us and approve a budget that does not further devastate people who are already struggling to get by.”

But what role, if any, should the government play in ensuring the greater good for all society? Has God called the body of Christ to a role? What is the greater good?

Elizabeth Newman, the Eula Mae and John Baugh Professor of Theology and Ethics at the [Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond](#), defines “greater good” as “growth in discipleship.” It comes from God’s faithfulness and promises, even when his followers cannot see his hand in the world, she explained.

Tarris Rosell, the Rosemary Flanigan Chair for the Center for Practical Bioethics, professor of pastoral theology in ethics and ministry praxis at [Central Baptist Theological Seminary](#) and a clinical associate professor of the history and philosophy of medicine for the University of Kansas Medical Center School of Medicine, believes government and the church can work in tandem.

All in this together

“There is a measure of separation of church and state in the United States, yes, but that does not mean that these are entirely separate entities,” he explained, noting the church is under the state’s umbrella and congregants also are members of the state. “We’re all in this together, with human obligations to one another, if not in every case, (as) that of one who also aims to follow Jesus.”

The government at all levels should help, but Christians need to realize its limitations and concentrate on fulfilling needs officials cannot fill, Richard Menninger, the Andrew B. Martin Professor of Religion and chair of the department of theological and religious studies at [Ottawa University](#) in Ottawa, Kan., explained.

“The government has a lot of programs to help, but it wants to keep them secular. ... It has the ability to touch people with physical and emotional needs, but it wants to divide out the spiritual,” Menninger said.

The church needs to adapt to government ways and reach the spiritual needs the government cannot meet, he said.

All levels of government should take specific actions, believes Roger Olson, the Foy Valentine Professor of Christian Theology and Ethics at Baylor University’s [Truett Theological Seminary](#) in Waco.

The state should provide

“The state should provide jobs for all able-bodied people and welfare for those who are disabled due to age or disability,” he said.

Because Newman sees the church as the “light for the world,” she cautioned that the body of Christ must serve from more than “simply a ‘social program’ approach.”

“The goal is not only to provide food, for example, but to do so in a way that is loving, personal and ‘bears Christ,’” she said. “The church can work with other programs when its own sense of identity and witness is not compromised.”