

# Voices: Government, God and radical hospitality

November 9, 2016

I grew up in a family of “Yellow Dog” Democrats, the last of our kind in 1980s East Texas. My childhood political leanings could best be summed up in the lyrics of Alabama’s classic tune Song of the South: “Daddy was a veteran, a Southern Democrat/ They oughta get a rich man to vote like that.” We assumed government had at least some role in helping give a “leg up” to those without access to basic needs and services.



Craig Nash We knew many of the people in our church disagreed with this, which is why we got anxious when the preacher started to sound too “political” from the pulpit. We suspected we were on “enemy ground,” even amongst those in our family of faith.

However, I came of age spiritually and emotionally in the 1990s and enacted the requisite youthful rebellion from my family at a time when the “Christian Right” had consolidated most of its power into the Republican Party. I became a more Christian version of Alex P. Keaton, Michael J. Fox’s character in *Family Ties*, who countered his hippie parents by embracing the supply-side economics of Ronald Reagan. We (the Christian Alex P. Keatons) embraced the notion it is the job of the church, not the

government, to take care of the poor.

### **'Government or God?'**



I have neither the intention nor the theological and biblical chops to answer the “government or God?” question when it comes to taking care of the poor and feeding the hungry. If I had to give you my current position paper on the subject, I’d say Christians are called by God to feed the hungry. We also have a biblical calling to exercise wisdom, and I believe it is wise to use every tool at our disposal to help realize the kingdom of God in our midst, and one of those tools, among many, is government.

I will say, though, that when our churches seek to replace or replicate government services in an effort to “put our money where our mouth is,” we often miss the point. We read the stories of Jesus feeding the crowds, throwing parties and sharing meals with undesirables, and we often see these narratives as a mandate for us to feed people, to give stuff away.

When we read these stories in such a way, we give ourselves an opportunity to warm our own hearts at our good deeds: Aren’t we such good people? We are doing the difficult work of feeding people.

### **What’s really hard**

But I don’t think feeding people is the really difficult work Jesus calls us to. What is really hard is inviting people into our worlds, our homes, our churches as equals. When I read the “giving” stories of Jesus, I sense the real scandal was in his giving up his position of power (Philippians 2, anyone?) to be on equal footing with those who he came to serve. Many of our efforts at charity do nothing more than reinforce the notion that we are

the “haves” and those we are helping are the “have nots.”

And this is where I believe government services, operated well, can help us more accurately model the call of Jesus.

If we can render to Caesar by demanding that our civil society better takes care of “the least of these,” maybe we can more effectively render to God by inviting people into our worlds without the burden of us being the “helper.”

### **Practical goal**

Here’s a practical goal for our families and churches: What if for every ounce of energy we spend this coming holiday season to feed someone or to help a family with Christmas gifts, we dedicated an equal amount of effort next year to push for better public schools and higher-paying jobs, or to increase access to nutrition benefits, or to provide more funding for child nutrition programs?

What if this were a form of “emptying ourselves,” by asking someone else, and not us, to be the helper?

Whether we believe government is evil, neutral or a force for good, maybe being “wise as serpents” means using it to empty ourselves of our savior complex, so that we can practice the radical hospitality Jesus calls us to.

*Craig Nash is a child hunger outreach specialist and the No Kid Hungry regional coordinator for the Texas Hunger Initiative, based in Baylor University’s Diana Garland School of Social Work.*