

# **Voices: On the value of charity, or why government aid is necessary**

May 16, 2018

From the onset, let me say this: I'm a big believer in nonprofits.

I've spent my adult life teaching my students that the Christian life is a radical life, one characterized by grace, abundance and self-giving. There is no substitute for the little way of love.

For the Christian, the person is not a number or a set of attributes, but a person, loved by God, with intricate and needs bound up with their own story.

There is no replacing this with a one-size-fits-all approach, for care for persons means time, attention and empathy. When Christians exercise charity toward those who are hurt, it is not in some abstract way, but in ways which pay attention to the contours of the wound.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is, among other things, about this kind of attention: that the Samaritan does not treat the wounded traveler as an object, but a subject, with particular needs who needs very particular kinds of healing.

## **Who cares?**

I bring all of this up because rumors are surfacing again about cutting Social Security and other social welfare programs, backed (again) by the routine claim that caring for others should be the job of nonprofits, the work of charity, and not the work of government.

Putting aside the questions about financial solvency, I want to address this basic complaint by forecasting where I'm going to end: that Christians—and Baptists, in particular—should affirm the place of government aid.

In other words, there are good reasons that Christians of all people should affirm that government aid is a good and right thing.

## **Who gives?**

Every nonprofit is built on one premise: we give to the things we care about.

Whether you care for orphans or the homeless or preserving the Barrier reef, there is a nonprofit for you to give to. We do not, as a general rule, provide voluntary aid to those we are not moved by love to aid.

And nonprofits know this: all of our lives are sheltered in one way or another from those things we don't wish to see, and it is the goal of nonprofits to make us care about those things. It's a dirty trick when the SPCA confronts me with images of abused pets in the middle of my TV show, because now I am confronted with a choice: to care or not care — not knowing is now impossible!

We all give money voluntarily to those things we care about. And some things draw out of us more care than others; some wounds we want to attend to more than others. For there are some wounds which we look at and call self-inflicted, or trivial or (worst of all) not wounds. To put it bluntly: everyone loves to help children, but addicts are on their own.

Ministries to the hungry abound, but ministries to gambling addiction, sex workers and the HIV-positive are fewer. Christians are not immune from this: we give to those things we care about. And there remain things which

Christians do not care about, in part from lack of exposure, and, in part, from lack of charity.

Whatever the cause, the wounds of the world remain with this basic problem: we give charitably to the things we care about.

## **Who loves?**

This, I suggest, is a major reason why Christians should affirm government aid: being made to care for things that we did not voluntarily give to invites us to see the value of a need independent of whether we care about that need.

Government aid serves as an accidental teacher, calling our attention to those wounds beyond the scope of our voluntary attention, wounds which are in need of binding up nonetheless. To say that we need no teacher other than the impulses of our heart in our giving is to arrogantly assume that our choice is sovereign and that our obligations extend only to things which I can see and want to care for.

Government aid, though given in ways which fail the measure of love, exceed the limits of our attention and natural affection. The two must work hand-in-hand: deep love with scope of care, attention with breadth, natural affinity with needs we have no time for.

For those beyond our scope of natural affection are the children of God as well. For the Christian, our money is God's, ordered toward the good that is God and meant for the benefit of God's creation.

It matters little in God's economy whether I think their need is worthy, but that God already has declared it worthy. All that is required now is that I am given the eyes to see what God already has, and perhaps it is government aid for those beyond my scope of concern that provides that

catalyst.

*Myles Werntz is assistant professor of Christian ethics and practical theology and the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon Seminary in Abilene. Email him at [Myles.Werntz@hsutx.edu](mailto:Myles.Werntz@hsutx.edu).*