Can We Agree on This?

There has been a lot of debate on economics in the Christian world these last fifteen to twenty years, and despite some of the rhetoric, much of this debate has been healthy. But perhaps it is also time to make note of some of the things that Christians should agree on whether they be of a limited-government persuasion or not. Here are some issues that the “Christian left” and the “Christian right” should be able to agree on.

1. We should agree that holistic ministry that presents both Christ as Savior and Lord and concern for people’s physical need is what the church and the parachurch should be doing.

2. We should agree that what used to be called “the brotherhood of man under the Fatherhood of God” is not what we are about. Humanity needs to be reconciled to God, and while everyone is our neighbor in some sense, they are not all our brothers in the sense that those who are in Christ are. We are here to reconcile people to Christ and then to each other.

3. Though there is a sense in which slums and poverty are “breeding grounds for crime,” ultimately we all, rich and poor, are morally accountable to God for what we do with our lives. “Society” does not make a criminal out of anyone. Affluence is not a cure for sin! As Tony Evans says, poverty and racism doesn’t make people pregnant; immorality does. Respect for the poor involves regarding them, like us, as morally responsible agents.

4. The Bible displays a strong concern for the poor, and at the same time it says, “Do not show favoritism to a poor man in his lawsuit” (Exodus 23:2). The poor are not to exploit the rich at law any more than the other way around.

5. Regardless of what we believe about whether civil government should get involved in welfare and feeding the poor or not, we should agree that government programs should not replace the work of the church and the parachurch. The real tragedy is not so much the adoption of welfare laws as the fact that the church folded up its tents when the government came to town. Suppose it had been a government bureaucrat, rather than a Baptist preacher, who had helped Tony Campolo’s mother? Would Campolo know Christ today?

6. Whatever we believe about government regulations and bureaucracy being a good thing or a bad one in many situations, we can at least agree that regulations, necessary or otherwise, hit hardest on the poor and those who are supposed to minister to them. Building codes, zoning laws, and “conditional use permits” make it more difficult and costly to build affordable housing and raise the cost of any kind of ministry that uses building space to minister. Zoning laws make much microenterprise technically illegal. Labor laws make it more costly to empower the poor in work programs. We can disagree about
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how much of this bureaucracy needs to be dismantled, but we can all be aware that it imposes burdens on those who would try to serve the poor. Who owns the pond? we need to ask, as John Perkins so rightly puts it. But we also need to ask, Who writes and interprets the health and safety regulations for the pond and for the fish coming out of it?

7. We should agree that we can acknowledge the sins of our group but really repent only of our own sins that we have in fact committed. As C.S. Lewis points out in his masterful essay “Dangers of National Repentance,” when we try to repent for others we are really judging them. If my government is doing something unjust and I did not support it, I am not guilty of what my government has done; in fact, Lewis says, the people in the government are neighbors and entitled to as much charity for their sins as any other neighbor.

8. We should agree that faith in Christ comes first and that we are brothers in Christ first before we are people with different political opinions and different political approaches to what we do. We should do what we think right, and at the Last Day what political opinions we had will not be the top question.

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