Christians Should be Careful with Welfare **[1]**

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Welfare can become a problem when it becomes convenient. While welfare is often criticised for letting people become dependent on welfare, I want to argue that there is a danger of welfare being convenient for those not receiving it.

For much of history, those who fell into poverty, illness, famine, or suffered in natural disasters would have little recourse for help. They may have been able to rely on their family or tribe, but these could also have viewed the stricken as a liability (such as those who contracted infectious diseases) and be ostracised. These people would typically be left to their own devices. If they could not recover, then death was often the outcome, or the effects could be felt across generations.

Although there are historic examples of government assistance programmes (such as the grain doles that the Roman emperors gave to poor in Rome), welfare as we know it today is unparalleled in history. For welfare states, the assistance that they provide to those in need (whether those in need of healthcare, the elderly, the destitute, or victims of all sorts of tragedies) is a marker of pride: we (both the government, which administers, and society at large, which ultimately funds these programmes through taxes) care about each other. It is an incredible achievement for any society which can implement welfare sustainably. The pride is justified. What a beautiful thing it is to say those, who would otherwise suffer, can *fare (to go; to be) well*!

However, even with the best of intentions, there is a hidden danger with being overly reliant on systems of welfare. Although there are various criticisms of welfare, the word of caution I want to issue is from a heart perspective.

Christians have a mandate to care for the poor and needy (e.g. Luke 3:11, Matthew 25:35–40, James 2:15–17, 1 John 3:17–18). And so, on one hand, it makes sense to advocate for policies and institutions to take care of the poor and needy. On the other hand, these injunctions are *personal*. There is a danger, particularly for Christians, in that welfare systems can lead to the temptation to abdicate responsibility to take action (i.e. care for other people) oneself. It is not good enough to "love your neighbour" in an abstract sense. If there is an institution (even if run by churches) which takes care of the people in need, and now someone thinks that they don't need to be involved directly or do any work (because they are already paying taxes or making charitable donations), that can lead to less loving behaviour when directly confronted by someone in need.

Again, I say praise God that through welfare institutions, people in desperate situations can get the help that they need. And often it is necessary for welfare work to be done by professionals, such as healthcare professionals and social workers1. But God calls all of us to love our neighbours in a direct and personal sense. Governments, charities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and even churches are not, and should not be, an excuse to delegate away our responsibilities and

mandates. Because the day-to-day of welfare often are far removed from the donors and taxpayer who enable it to function, and the taxpayers and donors feel burdened by needing to contribute, we need to work to ensure that we still have the right heart attitude. We cannot ignore people who come across our paths who are in need, thinking that it is someone else's problem to deal with them. At the very least we need to help people with immediate needs, and help them access the services and programmes which can help them in a sustainable manner. Any and all of us can offer someone in need our patience, kindness, and even friendship. Doing this does not come natural to many of us living in the insulated, individualistic culture of the West. And this is very difficult where there are many people in need. In my own country, more than a third of *job-seeking* adults are unemployed [2], while more than 40% of *work-eligible* adults [3] are unemployed. This creates staggering need. Still, we are called to love our neighbours; that is the Kingdom of God.

In a disaster, such as a flood or an earthquake, modern governments typically step in to alleviate suffering and provide for those in need until the situation has somewhat returned to normal. Often this is done side-by-side with volunteers and people or independent organisations (such as churches) trying to help by donating and distributing food, giving people shelter, and helping in other direct ways. This synergy is perhaps the best response when there is need: governments and NGOs provide the skilled help that is needed, while individuals and communities can love their neighbours through making human connections and providing for basic needs. Sometimes both are needed to address the scale of a disaster (whether it is a hurricane, or record unemployment or homelessness).

Lastly, I want to stress that none of us can "save the world", or be involved in every emergency and outreach. That is why I have used the language of "people coming across our paths". Some people will be moved to help in a broader way (such people may choose careers or join NGOs which will allow them to do that), but most of us—apart from our taxes and charitable giving—will only have some individuals come across our path that we can help directly and in a meaningful way. We need to be open to meeting these individuals and journeying with them, and not put on blinders to miss them.

- 1. To effectively help someone dealing with substance addiction, homelessness, a terminal illness, etc., it is often necessary for professionals to be involved, such as social workers, psychologists, occupational therapists, grief councillors, etc. Working with people on these issues could take months or years.

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