



[Doug Bandow](#)

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Balancing The Federal Budget: What Would Jesus Cut?

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By DOUG BANDOW

Almost everyone agrees that Uncle Sam is a shameless wastrel living beyond his means. There is less agreement on what to do about it. “What would Jesus cut?” ask a number of left-wing evangelicals. They answer, “Not the programs favored by the left.”

It’s an interesting question that virtually no one in Washington asks.

For serious Christians, doing “what Jesus would do” matters. Unfortunately, it’s not an easy question to answer in today’s world: Imperfect human beings must seek to apply the truth in an imperfect world.

Every human institution is flawed and subject to God. But Jesus didn’t say much about politics. He acknowledged “Caesar’s” realm while advancing the Kingdom of God.

The religious right has been justly criticized for confusing its political views with Christian theology, but many leftish activists make the same mistake. The Bible says a lot about man’s relationship to other men and to God. Scripture doesn’t say much about how men (and women, obviously) should organize government and forcibly rule over others.

Indeed, the Bible is essentially silent on when men should regulate, tax, draft, arrest, imprison and kill their neighbors, as governments do *every day*. For these tasks we should heed James’ injunction to ask God for wisdom. We shouldn’t assume that God is on our side of the political divide.

Those on the religious left tend to miss the distinction between moral and political imperatives. Many of them are admirable individuals who live their principles, but that doesn't mean they are entitled to force others to live by those same principles. Which is typically what government is about.

For instance, there's no doubt that Christians (and Jews, who set practices upon which the early Christians relied) must be concerned about the poor. But no one should mistake taxation as compassion. In this regard the religious left shares much with President George W. Bush, who believed that giving away other people's money made him a "compassionate conservative." Giving away other peoples' money did make him a modern conservative — he increased spending on most every program and doubled the national debt — but it didn't mean he was compassionate.

There's nothing in Scripture to suggest that charity is supposed to be coercive. Real charity requires voluntariness. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said "As you did for the least of these brothers of mine," not "As you forced others to do." (Matthew 5: 40) In his second letter to the Corinthians the Apostle Paul refused to command his readers to give, "for God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Corinthians 8: 7) Paul laid on a thick guilt trip, but he refused to order his readers to act, even to aid the Jerusalem church.

As Marvin Olasky has written, compassion once meant to suffer with. That meant more than providing cash. It meant forming community. Over the years compassion turned into writing a check. Doing so is a good act. But it less fully reflects the love of Christ.

Today compassion has come to mean making other people write checks. Politicians talk about "compassion" as they vote to spend the taxpayers' money in an attempt to win votes. Yet Scripture does not suggest that Christians exhibit virtue by seizing the wealth of others to give away, no matter how worthwhile the objective might seem to be.

Consider the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus did not call for creation of the Kingdom of Israel Traveler Aid Bureau (KITAB) to assist those who had been set upon by highwaymen. Rather, he lauded the individual who, coming across someone in need, brought the person to an inn and paid for the latter's care.

Nothing Jesus said would prohibit creation of KITAB. However, establishing a government agency would be a question of public policy, involving practical trade-offs. Just spending money is no solution. The critical question is *how* to spend it, and there aren't a lot of clear answers about how to best achieve even widely shared ends.

Welfare is the classic example. Nearly three decades ago Charles Murray's *Losing Ground* demonstrated how well-intentioned government transfer payments destroyed families and communities, discouraged education and work, and encouraged illegitimacy and irresponsibility. Government actually was destroying dignity and creating dependency.

Even many liberals came to agree: President Bill Clinton signed the 1996 welfare reform legislation. That law, noted Pete Wehner of the Ethics and Public Policy, “ranks among the most humane social reforms of the last half-century.”

Yet the website of Sojourners, an inner-city organization and magazine headed by Jim Wallis, [declares that the proposed nine percent cut in federal discretionary spending](#) “would be devastating for domestic programs that provide basic nutrition, health, and opportunity to poor children and international aid programs that save lives every day.” Maybe this claim is true. But it is not an assertion to accept on faith.

Politicians always claim to do good things. They act like crusaders on horseback, riding in promising to save the world. Amidst wild applause they gallop off without looking back to see if they actually made anyone better off. After all, they have another crusade to launch elsewhere.

Unfortunately, many government programs don’t work. Food Stamps, [foreign aid](#) and Head Start are not exempt from problems. Any system based on spending someone else’s money suffers from limited accountability. Indeed, government agencies often profit — i.e., received increased budgets — if they fail to solve problems.

Moreover, as public choice economists have detailed, government responds to the most intense and best organized interest groups. That rarely means poor people. Those with the most at stake have an incentive to organize associations, contribute to politicians, and underwrite lobbying campaigns.

Thus, many anti-poverty programs are really welfare for the better off. For instance, federal housing programs are notorious for aiding developers. So-called “Food for Peace” was created to dump domestic agriculture surpluses overseas, inadvertently routinely ruining poor farmers in other lands.

This doesn’t there is no need for government and that no government program works. But the evangelical left should abandon its misty-eyed assumption that a government claim to be fighting poverty is the same as fighting poverty. Vestal Virgins do not staff the White House, Congress and federal regulatory agencies. Those who rule over us are not angelic human beings from whom greed, self-interest, arrogance and other vices have been drained.

Just look at the experience of the ever-expanding American welfare state. Special interest regulations promote corporate monopoly and impede competition. Restrictive controls destroy jobs and limit employment. Intrusive laws turn people into criminals and fill prisons. Taxes empower bureaucrats and penalize workers. Spending underwrites the influential and improvident. Lawmakers create problems and then intervene again to clean up the messes they created.

Christians should treat government with the same skepticism they apply to other human institutions. One Biblical principle not mentioned by the “What would Jesus cut”

activists is “Thou Shalt not Steal.” (Exodus 20:15) Whatever government takes should be used for the common good, which means spending responsibly for a public purpose.

Uncle Sam fails in this regard every minute of every day. Many programs are created by and for influential interest groups. Moreover, the waste, fraud and abuse in the federal government is legendary. Many agencies aren’t even able to account for the money they spend, let alone demonstrate that they are spending it well.

A new [Government Accountability Office report](#) hints at how far the government falls short. The 345-page study, entitled “Opportunities to Reduce Potential Duplication in Government Programs, Save Tax Dollars, and Enhance Revenue,” details just a fraction of the extravagant waste tolerated in Washington.

Many of the abuses are at the Pentagon, an appropriate target of the “What would Jesus cut” campaign. But the evangelical left’s favored social service agencies do no better. For instance, there are some 80 “economic development” programs. Alas, government redistributes than creates growth. Especially given the endless duplication: 52 programs for “entrepreneurial efforts,” 39 for “plans and strategies,” and 35 for “infrastructure.”

There are 100 different transportation programs and 17 different transit preparedness programs. As for welfare, the GAO cites 18 food and nutrition programs, 47 employment and training programs, and 62 transportation for the disadvantaged programs. There are 56 programs to teach financial literacy and 82 programs to improve teacher quality.

Surely Congress could make cuts in this spending without “devastating” the poor. To the contrary, like welfare reform, reducing or eliminating some of these programs would prove to be the most charitable and sensible thing to do.

The evangelical left is right to challenge every political institution to better meet its responsibilities to the people it represents, especially the most vulnerable and least influential. Activists like Jim Wallis correctly refuse to worship at the Pentagon altar, in contrast to liberal hawks like President Barack Obama and Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton](#). Military outlays should be cut—radically, in fact. But not because Jesus would do so. There really aren’t many Biblical principles on how best to defend our nation. Rather, there are good moral and practical arguments against initiating war and spending money as part of dubious foreign crusades. In fact, attempting to run the world actually [reduces American security while wasting money](#) — and often wrongly wreaking death and destruction on other peoples.

Those on the left need to be similarly skeptical of schemes to seize power in order to promote social justice. Government may be a tool of God, but it will never act like God. It is worth remembering Samuel’s response when the Israelites came to him demanding a king:

“This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the Lord will not answer you in that day.” (1 Samuel 8: 11-18)

Government is a necessary institution. But it is controlled by human beings subject to original sin and the allure of power. Warned Lord Acton, a devout Catholic, “power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” No where is that more dangerous than in politics, since no power is more absolute than that to arrest, imprison, and kill, all of which are used by the state to enforce its dictates.

Thus, sound public policy requires more than moral fervor and good intentions. Also necessary are common sense and political wisdom. The result will still be imperfect, but will be far more likely “to do good to all people,” as Paul instructed us. (Galations 6: 10)