Why Mainline Churches Oppose Faith-Based Initiatives  
Steven M. Tipton

What's wrong with compassion, wonder the faithful, and why in the world would churches oppose its enactment to help "the least of these" in America today? Unless, of course, they are opposing it in a political world, note the skeptical, where compassion is ideologically entangled with conservatism, and where faith-based initiatives serve partisan interests and ends, for example, in reassuring moderate voters that public provision and taxes can be cut without hurting the needy or harming the commonweal.

Political interests and ideologies do indeed figure in the public debate and legislative struggle over faith-based initiatives. But something more is being contested that reaches to our highest ideals and deepest convictions about the role of faith in public, about the good of government, and about their institutional interrelation in a society worth living in and working for.

What is the role of religion in American public life? Prophetic witness, voice of conscience, social activist and reformer, moral advocate and interlocutor? Or is it instead Good Samaritan and helping hand, loving heart and saving grace; exemplary community volunteer and charitable donor. The answers are many and diverse, some linked and others at odds, woven through the history of American ideals and actions, movements and institutions. And each answer carries with it a distinctive vision of good government interacting with communities of faith within the polity of a democratic republic. This is a moral drama where both justice and compassion in practice attest to the moral integrity of our society as a whole, even as church and state remain separate characters as institutions each governed by their own members. These contrasting visions of a good society inform the public argument over faith-based initiatives and the role of the mainline Protestant churches in its unfolding.

In announcing his initiatives within days of taking office, President Bush rehearsed his Inaugural Address by stressing that "compassion is the work of a nation, not just a government." We are "called by conscience to respond" to "deep needs and real suffering in the shadow of America's affluence, problems like addiction and abandonment and gang violence, domestic violence, mental illness and homelessness." This approach rests on a distinction Mr. Bush spelled out between the moral aims and responsibilities of governmental and religious institutions: Government has important responsibilities for public health or public order and civil rights. And government will never be replaced by charities and community groups. Yet when we see social needs in America, my
administration will look first to faith-based programs and community groups, which have proven their power to save and change lives.

The priority given to religious and community charities over governmental responsibility for meeting "social needs in America" draws its moral force and plausibility from positing social needs in the personal terms of lives that need to be saved and changed by the power of religious faith and charitable love of neighbor in order to overcome addiction, abandonment and domestic violence, for example. These contrast to the structural terms of political-economic problems such as adequate work, wages, healthcare and affordable housing to sustain families on the lower rungs of the social ladder. These structural problems put the onus instead on governmental legislation, policy and social spending.

In his Inaugural Address, President Bush likewise affirmed compassion as America's cardinal virtue:

America at its best is compassionate. In the quiet of American conscience, we know that deep, persistent poverty is unworthy of our nation's purpose. And whatever our views of its cause, we can agree that children at risk are not at fault. Abandonment and abuse are not acts of God, they are failures of love. And the proliferation of prisons, however necessary, is no substitute for hope and order in our souls.... Government has great responsibilities, for public safety and public health, for civil rights and common schools. Yet compassion is the work of a nation, not just a government. And some needs and hurts are so deep they will only respond to a mentor's touch or a pastor's prayer.

In the political debate and moral argument of American public life, deep and persistent poverty may point to injustice, injury and exploitation. It raises questions of cause and culpability that in turn guide efforts to seek greater justice in the law, public policy and the arrangement of social institutions. In "the quiet of American conscience," by implicit contrast, poverty is, first of all, something unworthy of our nation's promise that everyone belongs and deserves a chance. They deserve not only opportunity but justice in the nation Bush pledges to work to build. That justice is presumably participatory and distributive as well as retributive and commutative. That is, it requires honest work at a living wage, for example, for all who can labor and thereby support themselves, provide for their children, and contribute to the commonweal. Compassion, to be sure, acknowledges disagreement over the causes of poverty and the necessity of proliferating prisons. But it stresses instead the innocence of children at risk, abandoned and abused from "failures of love." It announces a moral duty to respond to suffering, acknowledges the great responsibilities of government, and it notes the need for civic duty and "basic fairness" to sustain the public interest. But it emphasizes the duty of individual citizens to respond to one another in need, to listen to those who feel the pain of poverty, and to answer their hurt and suffering with a healing touch or a pastoral prayer.

Government is responsible for public safety and public health, civil rights and common schools. "Yet compassion is the work of a nation, not just a government," significantly enough, and what Mr. Bush stresses is personal responsibility as a call to conscience, a
demand for sacrifice, and a promised path to personal fulfillment through finding that "children and community are the commitments that set us free." First and last, our public interest depends on "private character, and on the uncounted, unhonored "acts of decency" persons freely choose to do every day of their own accord, in a voluntarist echo of Mother Theresa's maxim that "every day we are called to do small things with great love."

Here we stand at the functional intersection of evangelical Protestant faith and free-market libertarian belief to celebrate each person's compassionate feeling for others, as it inspires Good-Samaritan service to them without constraining the sovereignty of individual conscience and choice, or infringing the liberty of individual rights and entrepreneurial action.

What's missing? Conspicuous by their absence from this moral vision of faithful individuals freely serving one another out of love is the Calvinist emphasis in the Reformed tradition of American Protestantism on lawful social justice and covenantal virtue in accord with divine sovereignty and natural law; and its counterparts in the naturally lawful and virtuous corporatism of Catholic social teachings, and the biblical covenant and holiness of Jewish law. Also missing is the conciliar character of the synagogue or church, whether Presbyterian or Episcopal in its polity, whose members compose a public sphere or polis of their own to deliberate and debate common questions, and likewise take part in the moral argument of the polity at large as exemplary advocates and interlocutors.

Religious, civic and civil rights groups lined up on both sides of the faith-based legislation debated in the House in 2001. They did so along with religious lobbies and parachurch groups, non-religious moral advocacy groups, labor unions and professional guilds. Cross-cutting interests and mixed moral ideals played out through multivalent commitments to diverse constituencies to over-determine who came down where as political bedfellows.

By mid-2003, many mainline-church leaders had nonetheless united their voices against the Administration's faith-based initiative. "The poor are suffering because of a weakening economy," more than a score of them charged in a Pentecost letter to the President. "The poor are suffering because of resources being diverted to war and homeland security. And the poor are suffering because of a lack of attention in national public policy," featuring tax cuts that offer "virtually no help for those at the bottom of the economic ladder, while those at the top reap windfalls," and the resulting spending cuts in healthcare, education and social services fall heaviest on the poor. "The lack of a consistent, coherent, and integrated domestic policy that benefits low-income people makes our continued support for your faith-based initiative increasingly untenable," the church leaders concluded. It's time to talk, they urged, in a plea that went unanswered.

Both mainline-church supporters and critics of faith-based initiatives were left at last to face up to the challenge the radical Evangelical Jim Wallis defined in his initial diagnosis of the real danger posed to public faith by government backing for religious delivery of
social services as its top moral priority: "Those in power often prefer the service programs of religious groups to their prophetic voice for social justice," he observed. "But in the biblical tradition of prophets like Isaiah, the religious community is called to speak truth to power." To answer the question of how religious groups can safeguard their prophetic voice as they partner with government, Wallis quoted President Bush quoting Martin Luther King, as saying, "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state."

One of four Americans today earns less than the $8.70 per hour needed to keep a family of four above the official poverty line. Nearly one in three working families with children under twelve--many with two parents working low-wage jobs and earning incomes well over the poverty line--faced at least one critical hardship over the course of a year, such as going without food, being evicted, and failing to receive needed medical care, according to a 2001 study by the Economic Policy Institute. Without higher wages or a stronger social safety net, work alone cannot ensure a decent standard of living for many families on the lower half of the income ladder in American society, and charity alone cannot make up the shortfall.

Americans remain deeply divided over what to think and do about these matters, particularly when it comes to voting and paying taxes or wages, however united they stand on the power of prayer and the value of volunteer work. If we seek to understand the good of government more aptly and cogently, we need to ponder the good of do-gooding more fully and faithfully.

Steven M. Tipton is a Senior Fellow, Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Religion, & Professor of Sociology at Emory University.