

# Courageous Conversation

## Whose Job Is It to Care?

### PART ONE – SETTING THE TABLE

#### Open – A Central Issue of Our Time

If gay marriage and abortion are among the most heated moral issues of our time, the political issue that most divides Americans concerns the role (and therefore size) of our government. Today's version of that question is this: is care for the needy, poor, and elderly a state function or a private one? Liberals would increase the federal government's part in these tasks; conservatives would decrease it. The issue is whether social justice (as opposed to legal justice) belongs to the powers and responsibilities of the federal government or not.

For Christians, the issue is **not whether we help** "the least of these." Jesus commended those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, etc. – even claiming that in doing so they were serving him directly. (Matthew 25.40) As you will see below, both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament establish it as a duty of the faithful to care for the needy among us.

The issue on which Christians disagree is **what means we employ to help**.

- Big-government Christians (usually left-leaning) believe that the power of the state should be leveraged to bring about social justice. Their opponents accuse them of being socialists.
- Small-government Christians (usually conservative-leaning) believe that care for the poor should be a matter of conscience and not forced on people by the state through taxes. Their opponents accuse them of being callous and uncaring.

#### The General Purpose of Courageous Conversations

##### 1. **Getting Better at Disagreeing Lovingly**

In a time of incivility and disrespect between people who disagree on important matters, Courageous Conversations are designed to help build atrophied muscles for disagreeing civilly and respectfully.

*We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ... (Ephesians 4.15)*

##### 2. **Learning to See Our Differences as a Gift from God**

In an era of echo chambers, when Americans flock to birds of their own theological and political feather, courageous Christians capitalize on the God-given value of our differences. (1 Corinthians 12.4-26) This also means listening for God's voice in the things others say.

*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;<sup>5</sup> and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12.5-7)*

### 3. ***Finding New Ways to Collaborate.***

In our winner-take-all political and religious setting, we want to find ways for the two worldviews to work together and build something better than either would have come up with on their own.

*Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. <sup>10</sup>For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. (Ecclesiastes 4.9-10)*

### 4. ***Saving Our Nation***

If churches can learn to disagree and solve our problems in constructive, collaborative ways, we can become a resource to our cities, states, regions, and nations. In other words, we're saving the world.

*Jesus prayed, "Father...I in them, and you in me, that they become completely one, so that the world may know that you sent me, and that you love them as you love me. (17.23)*

## **Ground Rules**

In order to build new muscles for civility and mutual understanding, we build some basic practices into our Courageous Conversations.

#### 1. ***We actively love one another.***

Jesus' Golden Rule is the most direct guide to our conduct: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." (Matthew 7.12) which he repeats when he says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12.31) In our Courageous Conversations, these commands usually show up as active, patient listening and constructive, respectful comments. (John 13.34-35)

#### 2. ***We "Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church."***

Christians believe that we all have the Spirit of God. To remind ourselves of this, at least at first, after any person speaks, we'll repeat this chorus: "Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church." (1 Corinthians 14)

3. ***We take Community Responsibility***

If tensions rise and begin to get out of hand, that is not just an issue for the two or three people in the fray. It is a community issue, and we are all called to help as we can to restore Christian love. (Philippians 4.2-3)

## **PART TWO – PREPARATION MATERIALS**

### **A Brief Summary of Western-then-US History on This Matter**

Ancient Israel adhered (ideally) to the Torah, Moses' Law, which at some level viewed the care of the poor and hungry as a communal responsibility. This expectation persisted throughout the period of Israel's Kingdom, and prophets spoke out to hold rulers and people to it.

This view impacted Jesus, who continued the Israelite prophets' tradition of care for the poor and a critique of the careless rich. He held the rich responsible for the poor, and in moments he even pictured a divinely-enacted reversal of rich and poor.

Both Israel and Jesus influenced the earliest Christian churches, who continued to sense an obligation to care for the poor. Sometimes, though, as a small movement in a big empire, they confined their care to their poor "brothers and sisters" (i.e., other Christians). Most of early Christianity through the ancient period followed this pattern, with occasional nods to a broader sense of responsibility to all of the needy.

In Medieval Europe, Roman Catholic monasteries became the chief source of assistance and health care for the poor. They were capable of this largesse because many of them produced salable goods made by unpaid laborers who had taken a vow of poverty. The consequent capital was used to establish monastery hospitals and relief houses that persisted until the time of the Reformation.

For political and theological reasons, the reformers often dissolved the monasteries in territories they controlled. This led, in fits and starts, to government care for the poor in Europe. English Poor Laws, which distinguished between the worthy ("impotent") and unworthy ("indigent") poor, supplied outdoor relief for the former and physically punished the latter, afterwards confining them to work houses.

The American colonies inherited the English Poor Laws (mostly through Virginian Anglican practices) alongside a Puritan sense of mutual responsibility between poor and rich. This carried over into the practices of the early republic. Over the ensuing two-and-a-half centuries, the government leaders and citizenry of the U.S. have continued to debate the role of government

in caring for the poor. In general, the U.S. has not allotted that responsibility as fully to government as have its European counterparts.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century featured one significant theological movements and two periods of significant political change.

- The Social Gospel movement prompted an increasing number of Christian leaders to see the church as responsible for the plight of the poor and to bring the Kingdom of God on earth.
- Partly because of this, when the Great Depression and its increase in the population of the poor and needy, which evoked FDR's New Deal;
- and the 1960s, when an increased awareness of the invisible poor inclined more leaders and voters to back LBJ's War on Poverty.

These three flourishes increased the role of government in assisting the poor.

Ronald Reagan campaigned and won a landslide in 1980 on a vision of shrinking government – even asserting in his First Inaugural Address that “Government is not the solution. Government is the problem.” After 1981, when his plans began to cut taxes and lower spending on social programs, three-and-a-half decades of intensive debate on this issue have followed. In this current debate, good and faithful people disagree significantly.

## **A Longer History with Documents**

### **The Biblical Call to Care**

The history represented in scripture spans thousands of years and many different circumstances. For our purposes, the nation Israel as described in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the early Christian church as described in the New Testament form two vastly different models for the delivery of care.

#### ***The Nation of Israel***

Moses' Law describes Israel's responsibility for their poor – a responsibility to which the prophets consistently recall the nation's attention. The law and prophets describe several ways to carry out this responsibility.

- The convention of gleaning.  
When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the

widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this. (Deuteronomy 24.19-22)

- The third-year tithe (one tenth of all produce in the land) customarily went to Levites (priests) and the widows and orphans. (Deuteronomy 14.29)
- The Prophetic Tradition
  - Religious ritual is empty without care for the poor.  
*“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
 to loose the chains of injustice  
 and untie the cords of the yoke,  
 to set the oppressed free  
 and break every yoke?  
<sup>7</sup> Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
 and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—  
 when you see the naked, to clothe them,  
 and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?  
<sup>8</sup> Then your light will break forth like the dawn,  
 and your healing will quickly appear;  
 then your righteousness<sup>[a]</sup> will go before you,  
 and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.  
<sup>9</sup> Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;  
 you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. (Isaiah 58.6-9)*
  - God’s provision for the poor  
*I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor  
 and upholds the cause of the needy. (Psalm 140.12)*

### **Jesus**

In some ways, Jesus continues the prophets’ call to serve the entire population of the poor.

- John the Baptist, to whom Jesus’ ministry is connected, shouted to the crowds by the Jordan, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.” (Luke 2.11)
- When Jesus challenges a rich young man to full devotion by requiring that he “sell everything you have,” Jesus is also concerned with where that money goes: “and give the money to the poor.” (Mark 10.21)
- In Luke’s Gospel, both Mary and Jesus both picture a reversal of rich and poor – Mary in the Magnificat (Luke 1.46-55) and Jesus in the Sermon on the Plain (“Blessed are the poor”...and “Woe to you rich,” in Luke 6.20, 24)
- Also in Luke, Jesus warns wealthy people who accrue with no thought for those who need that they are under God’s judgment.
  - The Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12.13-21)
  - The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16.19-31))
  - The encounter with Zacchaeus the “very rich” tax collector who covenants to pay back all he has defrauded and give money to the poor. (Luke 19.1-10)

In all of the references above, “the poor” are a category of humans (or perhaps Israelites), not limited to Jesus’ followers.

The Jesus of Matthew’s Gospel does pivot toward the specific care for other disciples (as opposed to all the poor) in his famous Parable of the Sheep and the Goats: “I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat...[Because] inasmuch as you’ve done it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you’ve done it to me.” (Matthew 25.40)

### ***The Earliest Christians***

Explicit calls to serve the poor continue in the New Testament beyond the Gospels, but most (if not all) of them focus Christian attention on caring for the Christian poor.

- The earliest church in Jerusalem after Pentecost receive every member’s goods into a common fund and then distribute to all according to their need; (Acts 2.44-46) while they heal and serve the population outside the church, these Christians do not seem to feel responsible to serve the non-Christian poor.
- Paul’s Syrian and Greek churches contribute money to the poor churches of Judaea; (Acts 11.29-30 and 20.1-5; Romans 15.26) In his letters, Paul does not command the Christian communities that receive his letters to care for the poor of their city.
- The epistle of 1 John claims that “any [who] have material possessions and see their brother or sister (i.e., fellow Christian) in need, but have no pity on them” cannot have the love of God in them. (1 John 3.17-18) This is our third example of Christians being called to share their goods with other Christians.

The one New Testament book that features a general call to the poor, reminiscent of the Law and the Prophets is the Epistle of James.

- “Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. <sup>4</sup>Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you.
- James also continues Moses’ care for widows and orphans: “This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

It’s hard to say from our evidence what responsibility the earliest Christians felt to feed, clothe, and otherwise assist the non-Christian poor. To say that they felt no such responsibility would be an argument from silence. But it’s difficult to find examples or exhortations in the NT literature.

***Ancient and Medieval Catholicism***

In medieval Europe, monasteries were the main source of relief and care for the poor. Because they housed a company of capable and industrious (sometimes cream-of-the-crop) men or women who had all taken a vow of poverty, the monasteries often became wealthy. Between the direct “dole,” their ethic of hospitality, and the provision of other health care, these Roman Catholic institutions functioned for long centuries as a humane force in medieval culture. This personal and social function would be dearly missed in the Reformation period and beyond, when the monasteries were either dissolved or depleted and the government began to assume the function of caring for the poor. In that setting, with the increase of the poor population that came with the industrial revolution, care for the poor became impersonal and bureaucratic.

Sources:

<https://gratefultothedeath.wordpress.com/2010/08/06/medieval-monasteries-in-the-history-of-hospitals/>

<http://timothystanley.co.uk/blog/the-modern-welfare-state-could-learn-a-lot-from-the-medieval-monastery>

***Government Assistance to the Poor in Scripture***

The Nation of Israel.

When the people of Israel became a nation, Moses’ Law was presumed to apply to the government. That said, we have little evidence about whether the policies of the government were shaped by Torah. We do know that throughout the period of Israel’s Kingdom, the prophets continued to hold the people and their kings to the Torah’s spirit of generosity to the poor.

Earliest Christianity.

Jesus, his disciples, and the early Christian church that sprang from them all operated under the power of the Roman Empire. That means that lobbying congress to care for the poor was not an option for our most ancient Christian forebears. The early Christians had little to no political power in their setting. In that setting, they cared for one another. This makes it difficult for us now to discern what Jesus or Peter or Paul would tell us about whether the Kingdom of God ought to be pursued through government programs or not.

***The History of the US Government’s Role***

Like all of our issues, our national debate about the proper role and size of government has an important history that forms our context today.

### ***English Poor Laws***

Monasteries were the primary source of relief to the poor in medieval Europe, both directly and through hospitals like St. Thomas' and St. Bartholomew's in London. When the English Reformation dissolved the monasteries, the social problem fell to the government. After attempting unsuccessfully to tax Londonites to keep the hospitals alive (revenues weren't sufficient) and moving through several iterations of a poor tax levied on middle-class landowners, it ultimately turned to legislation called the Poor Laws.

Vagabonds and Beggars Act (1495) – Even before the English Reformation, the government had seen fit to define a proper response to vagrancy and begging. The answer was work: "Vagabonds, idle and suspected persons shall be set in the stocks for three days and three nights and have none other sustenance but bread and water and then shall be put out of Town. Every beggar suitable to work shall resort to the Hundred where he last dwelled, is best known, or was born and there remain upon the pain aforesaid."

The First Poor Laws (1601) – Under Elizabeth I the "impotent poor" were supplied with food and material support through a public, parish-wide assessment. (There were around 15,000 parishes based around local church areas.) The able-bodied poor were placed in Houses of Correction and put to work.

The New Poor Laws (1834) – Jeremy Bentham, who founded a philosophical school called "Utilitarianism," believed that the good act was to be defined as one that would bring the greatest good to the greatest number of people. This fits his role in working with Lord Melbourne to reform England's poor laws. The combination of small parishes became "Poor Law Unions" and the workhouses (at least one per union) continued with more formal backing. The innovation of the New Poor Laws succeeded in some places, but their failures are chronicled mercilessly in the novels of Charles Dickens and Frances Trollope.

### ***Puritan Practices***

The Puritans believed that they were living out the New Israel in the New World. They gave their towns biblical names (e.g., Canaan and New Canaan) as often as English ones (Plymouth and New York). This marked their societal conduct as they asked how to address poverty and wealth.

#### The Puritan Theology of Wealth and Poverty

While wealth was a gift of God, for the Puritans, poverty was not the curse of God.

"Poverty in itself hath no crime in it, or fault to be ashamed of: but is oftentimes sent from God to the godly, either as a correction, or trial or searching, or both." (William Ames)

“None are shut out of the church for want of money, nor is poverty any eyesore to Christ. An empty heart may bar them out, but an empty purse cannot. His kingdom of grace hath ever been more consistent with despised poverty than wealth and honor.” (Richard Baxter)

“The rich man by liberality must dispose and comfort the poor,” (Thomas Lever, sermon)

“God never gave a gift, but that he sent occasion at one time or another to show it to God’s glory. As if he sent riches, he sendeth poor men to be helped with it. The poor man hath title to the rich man’s goods; so that the rich man ought to let the poor man have part of his riches to help and to comfort him withal.” (Hugh Latimer)

The Puritans believed that the differences in naturally-apportioned levels of wealth were neither a permanent dictate, nor an evil to be overturned by leveling, but a source of community interdependence.

“God could ... either have made men’s states more equal, or have given everyone sufficient of his own. But [God] hath rather chosen to make some rich, and some poor, that one might stand in need of another, and help another, that so he might try the goodness and mercy of them that are able, in supplying the wants of the rest.” (John Robinson)

Source: <http://www.apuritansmind.com/stewardship/rykenlelandpuritansandmoney/>

### ***The Constitution – Promote the General Welfare***

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, **promote the general Welfare**, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America. (Gouverneur Morris, Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, 1789)

The Preamble, though not legally binding, expresses in brief outline, the purpose of the constitution and of the federal government. Among the chief ends is to “promote the general Welfare.” The

### ***The Rights and Responsibilities of Congress***

The Congress shall have power to lay and collect taxes, duties, imposts and excises, to pay the debts and provide for the common defense and **general welfare** of the United States; but all duties, imposts and excises shall be uniform throughout the United States;

To borrow money on the credit of the United States; (Debt)

To regulate commerce with foreign nations, and among the several states, and with the Indian tribes; (Inter- and Intra-national Trade)

To establish a uniform rule of naturalization, and uniform laws on the subject of bankruptcies throughout the United States; (Immigration and Bankruptcy Laws)

To coin money, regulate the value thereof, and of foreign coin, and fix the standard of weights and measures;

To provide for the punishment of counterfeiting the securities and current coin of the United States; (Mint and Secure the Currency)

To establish post offices and post roads; (Postal Service)

To **promote** the progress of science and useful arts, by securing for limited times to authors and inventors the exclusive right to their respective writings and discoveries; (Copyright)

To constitute tribunals inferior to the Supreme Court; (Court System)

To define and punish piracies and felonies committed on the high seas, and offenses against the law of nations; (International Law)

To declare war, grant letters of marque and reprisal, and make rules concerning captures on land and water; (International Relations)

To raise and support armies, but no appropriation of money to that use shall be for a longer term than two years;

To provide and maintain a navy;

To make rules for the government and regulation of the land and naval forces; (Defense)

To provide for calling forth the militia to execute the laws of the union, suppress insurrections and repel invasions; (Law Enforcement)

To provide for organizing, arming, and disciplining, the militia, and for governing such part of them as may be employed in the service of the United States, reserving to the states respectively, the appointment of the officers, and the authority of training the militia according to the discipline prescribed by Congress; (Military Service)

To exercise exclusive legislation in all cases whatsoever, over such District (not exceeding ten miles square) as may, by cession of particular states, and the acceptance of Congress, become the seat of the government of the United States, and to exercise like authority over all places purchased by the consent of the legislature of the state in which the same shall be, for the erection of forts, magazines, arsenals, dockyards, and other needful buildings;-- (D.C.) And

To make all laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying into execution the foregoing powers, and all other powers vested by this Constitution in the government of the United States, or in any department or officer thereof. (Legislation)

## **The History of U.S. Government Help for the Poor/Needy**

### ***Stage One – Colonial America***

“...for this end, we must be knit together in this work as one man, we must entertain each other in brotherly Affection, we must be willing to abridge our selves of our superfluities, for the supply of others necessities, we must uphold a familiar Commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality, we must delight in each other, make others Conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labour, and suffer together, always having before our eyes our Commission and Community in the work, our Community as members of the same body, so shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, the Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us, as his own people and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways....: (Rev. John Winthrop, “The City Upon a Hill” preached aboard the Arabella, 1630)

“I am for doing good to the poor, but I differ in opinion of the means. I think the best way of doing good to the poor, is not making them easy in poverty, but leading or driving them out of it. In my youth I travelled much, and I observed in different countries, that the more public provisions were made for the poor, the less they provided for themselves, and of course became poorer. And, on the contrary, the less was done for them, the more they did for themselves, and became richer. There is no country in the world where so many provisions are established for them [as in England] ... with a solemn general law made by the rich to subject their estates to a heavy tax for the support of the poor.... [Yet] there is no country in the world in which the poor are more idle, dissolute, drunken, and insolent. The day you [Englishmen] passed that act, you took away from before their eyes the greatest of all inducements to industry, frugality, and sobriety, by giving them a dependence on somewhat else than a careful accumulation during youth and health, for support in age and sickness. In short, you offered a premium for the encouragement of idleness, and you should not now wonder that it has had its effect in the increase of poverty. (Benjamin Franklin, “On the Price of Corn, and Management of the Poor,” *London Chronicle*, November 1766, in *Writings*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay (New York: Library of America, 1987), pp. 587–588.)

### ***Stage Two – Early America***

The poor, unable to support themselves, are maintained by an assessment on the tithable persons in their parish. This assessment is levied and administered by twelve persons in each parish, called vestrymen, originally chosen by the housekeepers of the parish.... These are usually the most discreet farmers, so distributed through their parish, that every part of it may be under the immediate eye of some one of them. They are well acquainted with the details and economy of private life, and they find sufficient inducements to execute their charge well, in their philanthropy, in the approbation of their neighbors, and the distinction which that gives them. The poor who have neither property, friends, nor strength to labor, are boarded in the houses of good farmers, to whom a stipulated sum is annually paid. To those who are able to help themselves a little, or have friends from whom they derive some succors, inadequate however to their full maintenance, supplementary aids are given, which enable them to live comfortably in their own houses, or in the houses of their friends. Vagabonds, without visible property or vocation, are placed in workhouses, where they are well clothed, fed, lodged, and made to labor. ***Nearly the same method of providing for the poor prevails through all our***

*states; and from Savannah to Portsmouth you will seldom meet a beggar.* (Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787))

**A Bill for Support of the Poor**  
**Thomas Jefferson, State of Virginia, June 1789**

Be it enacted by the General Assembly, that the Aldermen of every county wherein such provision, as is herein after required for setting the poor of the county to work, shall not have been made, shall, so soon as conveniently may be,

- The counties shall buy an acreage and build or tend a house on it, then “shall cause all persons in their county, who are maintained thereby, or who seek relief therefrom, to be put into such house, to be there maintained and employed in such work as they shall be able to perform; and may also, by their warrant, apprehend and send to the same place all persons found wandering and begging alms, in the county...and shall put such beggar to work for any time not exceeding twenty days.”
- “shall hire some discreet man to oversee those who shall come or be put into such work-house, and shall, from time to time, ordain rules for his conduct, and for the government, employment, and correction of the persons subject to him, restraining him from correcting any of them with more stripes than ten, at one time, or for one offence.”
- And in order to keep them at work shall provide wool, cotton, flax, hemp and other materials, with the tools and implements necessary for the manufacture thereof.
- “the said Aldermen shall meet together [annually]... and by taxation of the persons and property, in their county...for raising money for the public exigencies, shall raise competent sums of money for the necessary relief of such poor, lame, impotent, blind, and other inhabitants of the county as are not able to maintain themselves.”
- The bill is designed for “setting the poor to work and keeping them so employed”
- “All able bodied persons not having wherewithal to maintain themselves, who shall waste their time in idle and dissolute courses, or shall loiter or wander abroad, refusing to work for reasonable wages, or to betake themselves to some honest and lawful calling, or who shall desert wives or children, without so providing for them as that they shall not become chargeable to a county, shall be deemed vagabonds, and shall be sent, by order of an Alderman, to the poor house, there to be kept to labor during such time as shall be limited by the order, not exceeding thirty days...”

***Stage Three – The Nineteenth Century***

"Let the moral sense be awakened and the moral influence be established in the minds of the improvident, the unfortunate, and the depraved. Let them be approached with kindness and an ingenuous concern for their welfare; inspire them with self-respect and encourage their industry and economy; in short, enlighten their minds and teach them to take care of themselves. Those are the methods of doing them real and permanent good and relieving the community from the pecuniary exactions, the multiplied exactions and threatening dangers of

which they are the authors." (First Annual Report of "The Society for the Prevention of Pauperism in the city of New York," 1818)

"Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations. They have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds, religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive. The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they found hospitals, prisons, and schools. If it is proposed to inculcate some truth or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society. Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association." (Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835/1840)

### **A Debate about State and Federal Help (1840-1854)**

#### ***Dorothy Dix successfully advocates for State and Federal Assistance***

After observing the treatment of the mentally ill in her state, Dorothy Dix reported to the Massachusetts State Legislature, "I proceed, Gentlemen, briefly to call your attention to the present state of Insane Persons confined within this Commonwealth, in cages, stalls, pens! Chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience." Her lobbying resulted in a State of Massachusetts bill (and law) to expand the state's mental hospital in Worcester. (1840-41)

Later, in the 1850s, Ms. Dix moved her attention to the federal government and persuaded the U.S. Congress to pass a bill that would set aside 12,225,000 acres of federal land: 10,000,000 acres for the benefit of the insane, and the remainder to be sold for the benefit of the "blind, deaf, and dumb", with proceeds distributed to the states to build and maintain asylums.

#### ***President Franklin Pierce Vetoes, on the constitutional principle of States' Responsibility***

However, President Franklin Pierce vetoed the bill, with the following words:

"I readily and, I trust, feelingly acknowledge the duty incumbent on us all as men and citizens, and as among the highest and holiest of our duties, to provide for those who, in the mysterious order of Providence, are subject to want and to disease of body or mind; but I can not find any authority in the Constitution for making the Federal Government the great almoner of public charity throughout the United States. To do so would, in my judgment, be contrary to the letter and spirit of the Constitution and subversive of the whole theory upon which the Union of these States is founded. And if it were admissible to contemplate the exercise of this power for any object whatever, I can not avoid the belief that it would in the end be prejudicial rather than beneficial in the noble offices of charity to have the charge of them transferred from the States to the Federal Government." (President Franklin Pierce, *Veto Message*, May 3, 1854)

***Lyman Beecher – The Preacher Puts Responsibility on the Church***

“But if there be in any corner of this assembly a narrow heart, a cold head, balancing all the while the loss and gain of charity, and meditating excuses for not giving if withholding should prove the better speculation, to such a one I would say, throw in your money, for you can not save it if you try. The poor will be with you always, and if you do not educate them, and stop the contagion of vice, they will swarm in your streets, and prowl about your dwellings, and pilfer from you ten times the amount you would need to give to render them useful and happy.

Nay, the tax-gatherer will knock at your door, and by force of law wrench from your clenched hand ten times the pittance required to support the virtuous poor. As good habits prevail the tax and charity will decline, but as vice prevails you will be compelled to pay more and more annually, as the contagion spreads, to support wretchedness, and to help on the wicked in their hard way to hell. Give, then, if thou hast no bowels of compassion, upon principles of covetousness. In self-defense, give a pittance to promote industry and virtue.” (Lyman Beecher, Extract from an Address, Autobiography, Correspondence, etc., of Lyman Beecher, Vol 1 Harper & Brothers.” 1864)

**Stage Four – The Social Gospel**

In the late 1800s, a Christian theological movement developed in the United States and Canada that proposed to answer Jesus’ prayer, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Leaders of the movement were liberal protestant pastors like Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch. They urged the joining of Gospel principles to all parts of life, including employers’ relationship with employees and government’s relationship to the poor.

The Social Gospel movement did not directly lobby congress, but by changing the way Christian leaders thought of their ministry and the mission of their congregations. Its impact may be seen in a 1910 statement of the Presbyterian Church called The Great Ends of the Church:

“The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.” (Presbyterian Book of Order)

The Social Gospel movement has often been credited (or charged) with influencing the American public and bridging toward the culture that made FDR’s New Deal palatable.

**Stage Five – The New Deal**

In the context of the Great Depression that had begun in 1929, Franklin Delano Roosevelt pictured help offering new levels of federal help to the poor through the New Deal.

“Throughout the nation men and women, forgotten in the political philosophy of the Government, look to us here for guidance and for more equitable opportunity to share in the distribution of national wealth... I pledge myself to a new deal for the American people. This is more than a political campaign. It is a call to arms.” (Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Democratic National Convention, 1932)

#### Immediate Relief

- The Public Works Administration provides jobs for the unemployed building government buildings, airports, hospitals, schools, roads, bridges, and dams. (\$3.3 billion in 1933-35 with private companies who built 35,000 projects)
- Efforts to address rural poverty: supply school lunches for the needy, build schools to supply jobs, electrification of rural areas, etc. Additionally, the controversial AAA (Agricultural Adjustment Act) aimed to manipulate the market to produce advantageous pricing and get farms back on their feet.
- National Recovery Administration (NRA) Blue Eagle campaign helped corporations to increase productivity (industrial production increased 55% between May 1933 and May 1935).

#### Lasting Programs

- The Social Security Act (1935)
- National Labor Relations Act (1935)
- Works Progress Administration federalized unemployment relief (
- Wealth Tax Act (Revenue Act of 1935) redistributes wealth by increasing the tax rate on incomes over \$5 million to 79%. (Only John D. Rockefeller made that amount!)
- Undistributed Profits Act (1936) makes retained corporate income taxable.
- Housing Act (1937) establishes US Housing Authority and US Department of the Interior.

#### ***Stage Five – The War on Poverty***

During Lyndon Johnson’s administration, a book by Michael Harrington entitled *The Other America* captured Johnson’s priority and swayed public opinion to increase forms of public aid.

“We are citizens of the richest and most fortunate nation in the history of the world...[W]e have never lost sight of our goal: an America in which every citizen shares all the opportunities of his society, in which every man has a chance to advance his welfare to the limit of his capacities.

We have come a long way toward this goal. We still have a long way to go. The distance which remains is the measure of the great unfinished work of our society. To finish that work.” (Pres Lyndon B. Johnson, War on Poverty Speech, 1964)

- The Social Security Amendments of 1965, which created Medicare and Medicaid and also expanded Social Security benefits for retirees, widows, the disabled and college-aged students, financed by an increase in the payroll tax cap and rates.
- The Food Stamp Act of 1964, which made the food stamps program, then only a pilot, permanent.
- The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which established the Job Corps, the VISTA program, the federal work-study program and a number of other initiatives. It also established the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), the arm of the White House responsible for implementing the war on poverty and which created the Head Start program in the process. (OEA was channeled differently under Pres Nixon and then finally ended in 1981 under Pres Reagan)
- The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, signed into law in 1965, which established the Title I program subsidizing school districts with a large share of impoverished students, among other provisions. ESEA has since been reauthorized, most recently in the No Child Left Behind Act.

### ***Ronald Reagan's Challenge to Growing Government***

From the start, Pres Ronald Reagan committed himself and the government to reducing spending and cutting taxes.

“Great as our tax burden is, it has not kept pace with public spending. For decades we have piled deficit upon deficit, mortgaging our future and our children's future for the temporary convenience of the present. To continue this long trend is to guarantee tremendous social, cultural, political, and economic upheavals.

“You and I, as individuals, can, by borrowing, live beyond our means, but for only a limited period of time. Why, then, should we think that collectively, as a nation, we're not bound by that same limitation? We must act today in order to preserve tomorrow. And let there be no misunderstanding: We are going to begin to act, beginning today.”

“In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem. From time to time we've been tempted to believe that society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people. Well, if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else? All of us together, in and out of government, must bear the burden. The solutions we seek must be equitable, with no one group singled out to pay a higher price.” (Pres Reagan's First Inaugural Address, 1981)

- Ronald Reagan's philosophy on government was influenced by Sen. Barry Goldwater's opposition to LBJ's Great Society and War on Poverty which, he said, “changed his life.” A sample of Sen Goldwater's thoughts:

"They use terms like the 'Great Society,' or as we were told a few days ago by the president, we must accept a greater government activity in the affairs of the people,"

- The budgetary results were significant:
  - Sen. Pete V. Domenici called the 1981 U.S. Federal Budget “the most dramatic reduction in the ongoing programs in the history of the country”
  - The Reagan administration cut the top individual tax rate from 70 percent to 28 percent;
  - Pres Reagan also cut the top corporate tax rate from 46 percent to 34 percent.

More than that, Pres Reagan started a new era for conservative politics in the US that changed the culture’s language about the role of government. About \$25 billion of the spending cuts from the 1982 Federal Budget —some 70 percent of the budget savings— were made in programs affecting the poor. (“Social Welfare Under Reagan,” CQ Press, 1984) This sparked a debate over the value of New Deal and War on Poverty programs for social welfare. Inevitably, that led the nation to revisit a distinction that dates from colonial and early-American debates, between The Worthy Poor and The Unworthy Poor.

Pres Reagan defended his plan in Feb 1981 with this distinction: “Those who through no fault of their own must rely on the rest of us, the poverty-stricken, the disabled, the elderly, all those with true need, can rest assured that the social safety net of programs they depend on are exempt from any cuts.”

### ***Bush (41)-Clinton-Bush (43)-Obama***

In the three post-Reagan decades (which this handout treats briefly because these developments are a part of living memory for many of us), American culture has grappled intensively with the issue of the federal government’s role in delivering services to the poor.

- Welfare for Work. In 1996, the Clinton administration and a Republican-majority congress compromised on a welfare reform bill that linked aid to work.
- No Child Left Behind. In 2002, George W. Bush and his Secretary of Education, William Bennett, persuaded congress to reform education in terms of test outcomes intended to ensure that schools across the nation were developing of skills and competencies that met agreed-upon standards.
- The Tea Party Movement. During the latter part of the Bush (43) Administration and throughout the Obama Administration, a dissenting voice has arisen that opposes establishment politics. A bit difficult to define over time, this voice speaks to the issue of government size by resisting bills that will increase/not reduce government spending.
- The Affordable Care Act. In a still-controversial move, the Obama administration and a Democratic-majority Congress passed in 2010 an act that defines healthcare as a right – as the responsibility of a people (and therefore a federal government) rather than a person/individual.

In these developments, the nation continues to work out issues of federal vs state and local governmental responsibility, as well as public vs private responsibility.