

What would it be like if churches took on a social role?

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Last week my pastor preached about the role of the local church in its service to its community. He touched on a number of subjects, but one of those reflected something that I have written about from time to time in this column.

At some point in America's history, America's churches abdicated a vital function to the government, and that function was taking care of those who are poor and in need. The church is far better equipped to handle this role than the government ever could be, and this is being demonstrated by the astounding growth of our entitlement programs.

But it also indicates our nation's drift towards a secular, socialist society that uses entitlements to buy votes, build agendas and exercise control over a population that does not want to be held accountable. In drifting towards this new "enlightened" society, it has also drifted away from the church, and the church has slowly given away its responsibility to help people in a responsible way.

Our pastor described how in the early church, Christians did provide for the poor, but they also did it in a way that held people accountable for what they received and encouraged them to work themselves out of the conditions that caused them to be in need in the first place.

Because of political correctness, high taxes, and the availability of government funded social programs, I believe our churches at some point convinced themselves that not only was it impossible to fund the welfare of its community, but that it had also become improper to demand accountability from the recipients or to take away their dignity by making such a demand.

In the early church, the idea was to provide for the needs of those who were actually incapable of providing for themselves. However, they also wanted to see those who were capable of caring for themselves become financially independent of the church, and in turn become providers for their families and for those who were actually in need.

His sermon has prompted me to think again about what a fully functional American church might look like if it were to reclaim its rightful role in society. This could only be possible if Christians were to give to the church as they should, which I believe is at least a tithe. It could also only be possible if the government would not interfere with the church or provide any kind of funding to the church.

If those conditions were met, what would the church look like, and by that I mean, what would its facilities look like? After all, a church's built environment is a reflection of its ministries, and many of those ministries would take a burden of society out of the realm of government.

One of the first roles the church should be providing is to take care of those that can't take care of themselves.

Kitchen facilities would make it possible to prepare hot meals for delivery to the elderly. A well-stocked pantry would make food available for people who are unemployed or unable to work.

Housing facilities could be provided for those who have lost their homes for financial, medical or mental health reasons. Housing could be provided for the elderly or for families that are preparing for missionary work, or for families that are immigrating to this country (legally, of course).

Churches could also provide housing for women who are pregnant, who have chosen not to abort their child and are seeking a safe place to give birth and live for a while.

Churches could provide a place for people to be trained and reintroduced into society, and to help them not to go back to a life of crime. They could provide places that give drug users the treatment they need to get off of drugs permanently, or for those that have become mentally ill due to the use of drugs.

Churches could provide medical clinics, places for kids to play after school, facilities for adults to receive an education, or Christian schools that would give children the kind of education that they need. Churches could even provide a place to bury their dead.

The point is, churches have done all of these things during the long life of the church, and more. It's just that they don't do these as much as they did in the past – but perhaps even that is changing. If one church can look at the model of the early church and make changes, so can others.

What it will take is a change of mindset and of world view within the church to reacquire the sense of responsibility. It will also take a government that is willing to give up the role of being the sole provider of social services. Not something that will be given up easily, but given our current climate, there is going to be tremendous need for what only the church can do effectively.



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