

Keep Jesus Out of Your Socialism

The headline of the full-page ad asks, "What Would Jesus Cut?—A budget is a moral document." The text continues, "Our faith tells us that the moral test of a society is how it treats the poor."

The ad was produced by Sojourners, a self-described "evangelical" organization whose slogan is "Faith in Action for Social Justice." The ad was signed by Sojourners President Jim Wallis and more than two dozen religious left pastors, theologians and activists. They urge our legislators to ask themselves, "What would Jesus cut?" from the federal budget.

How would *you* answer that question? My answer would be, "It's a nonsense question. Your premise is faulty. Your priorities are not His priorities."

Jesus had many opportunities to confront the Roman government about its spending priorities. It was, after all, one of the most brutal regimes in history. If the question "What would Jesus cut?" has any biblical relevance, we should be able to cite instances where Jesus lectured the Roman oppressors the same way the religious left lectures America.

Just compare ancient Rome with America today. Rome sent its armies out to conquer; America sends its soldiers out to liberate. Rome demanded tribute from other nations; America sends aid and emergency relief around the world. Rome enslaved nations; America rebuilds nations.

If the federal budget is a "moral document," what does it say about America? It suggests to me that America may be the most moral nation on earth! Name one other country that has spent \$15 billion fighting AIDS in Africa. Name one other country that has provided more disaster relief, that has built more

schools and water treatment plants, that has supplied more food aid around the world, that has sent more doctors, teachers and technical advisers to developing nations.

Even America's military budget—much of which is being spent to rebuild Iraq and Afghanistan—reflects the basic compassion and unselfishness of the American people. Clearly, America hardly deserves any scolding from the Sojourners soapbox.

Did Jesus ever lecture the Roman Empire about its budget priorities? In Matthew 8, when the Roman centurion approached Jesus in Capernaum, our Lord could have said, "How dare you, a Roman warmonger, come to Me asking favors? Change your priorities! Tell your bosses in Rome to stop buying chariots and start funding welfare programs!" But Jesus didn't lecture the centurion. He said, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith!"

In Matthew 22, when the Pharisees asked if it was right to pay taxes to Caesar, the Lord could have thundered against Caesar's misplaced budget priorities. Instead, He said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

In John 18, Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect, a friend of Caesar. Why didn't He give Pilate an earful about the injustice of Roman rule? If ever there was a time for Jesus to "speak truth to power" and become the "social justice Messiah," that was it!

But Jesus didn't preach the social gospel to Pontius Pilate. Oh, he spoke truth to power, all right. He delivered a profound message to Pontius Pilate—and to you and me: "My kingdom is not of this world."

Now, I'm not saying that Christians are never called to confront their government. God bless Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the confessing church for standing against Nazi genocide. But that's not the situation here.

And I'm not saying there isn't a social and compassionate dimension to the Christian gospel. There certainly is! Jesus had great compassion for the poor.

He preached in Nazareth, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." He sent word to John the Baptist, "The deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor." Jesus presented the obligation to help the poor as an individual responsibility, a kingdom responsibility—not the duty of the secular government.

Both the religious and secular left in America seem to want government to replace the church in ministering to the poor and needy. One of Barack Obama's first proposals as president was a plan to slash tax deductions for charitable donations by high-income taxpayers.

President Obama reasoned that a tax deduction "shouldn't be a determining factor as to whether you're giving that hundred dollars to the homeless shelter." Maybe so—but since private charities do so much good for the poor, why eliminate incentives for charitable giving? Could it be that liberals see private charities as *competing* with the big government welfare state?

In Romans 13, Paul tells us that we pay our taxes and support the government so that we will have a just, orderly society in which law-abiding citizens are protected from wrongdoers. But the responsibility for mercy and compassion belongs to the church—not the government.

What would Jesus cut? When He stood before the Roman Empire, He didn't suggest cuts. He *received* cuts. His flesh was cut by Roman nails and a Roman spear. He was bruised for our transgressions, and with His cuts we are healed. That's the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Stay tuned. In Part 2, we'll see how Jesus dealt with the

“radical leftists” among his disciples.

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