

Food Stamps Spark War of Words by Church Officials

Congressional fighting over the reauthorization of government assistance commonly known as food stamps is provoking language worthy of a religious war.

Some church officials argue the only faithful option for Christians is to preserve the existing growth trajectory of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Dire prophecies by some church agencies that “devastating cuts” will “increase suffering” respond to a bill from the House of Representatives to restrict SNAP’s growth.

The “Circle of Protection” has assembled evangelicals, mainline Protestants and Catholics to oppose limits on food stamp growth.

On Sept. 19, the House of Representatives approved reducing SNAP increases over the next 10 years in a program that costs nearly \$80 billion annually. Food stamp recipients have increased by 70 percent since 2008, with 47 million Americans, or about 15 percent of the nation, now getting food stamps.

“While IRD [the Institute on Religion and Democracy] takes no position on programs like SNAP, we do challenge church officials who speak as if the only way to live out Christian compassion is by endorsing unrestrained growth of government programs,” says IRD President Mark Tooley.

The IRD is an ecumenical alliance of U.S. Christians working to reform their churches’ social witness.

“These denominational agencies discount Christians who have a variety of views on agriculture and food assistance policy,” Tooley adds. “Church officials should be reluctant to endorse specific public policy proposals on issues of prudential

judgment where Christians can disagree.

“Church opponents of restricting food stamp growth never quote St. Paul’s admonition: ‘The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.’ The biblical view of compassion understands humans as moral beings, not just victims, who need not just assistance when afflicted, but also encouragement toward labor and discouragement away from dependency.

“Welfare state religionists seem never to admit any ceiling to proper social spending and to fear any proposed limits to government programs as attacks on the poor. The ostensibly devastating ‘cuts’ to food stamps reportedly will only allow growth of 57 percent. Does gospel fidelity require doubling or tripling the spending instead? And why stop there?”

“In the view of many of these church officials, Jesus purportedly favors government’s constantly increasing control,” Tooley concludes. “Does He not affirm any brakes on state power or have no concern for unending welfare’s impact on the souls of individuals, communities and nations? Are these church food stamp enthusiasts never willing to consider alternatives to chronic dependency?”