> "Man must cease attributing his problems to his environment, and learn again to exercise his will—his personal responsibility in the realm of faith and morals."
> —Albert Schweitzer

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Welfare and Christianity

It is beyond question that Christians should be compassionate. We are to give to the poor and aid the needy (Matthew 19:21; Luke 14:13; Galatians 2:10; etc.). We are to lend a helping hand to those who have stumbled and bear the burdens of the weak (Acts 20:35; Galatians 6:2; James 1:27; etc.). It is sin to us if we know to do good and fail to do it (James 4:17; Proverbs 3:27-28). But how far does this go?

A certain tension exists in God's Word on this point. On the one hand, God indeed commands us to give, help, aid, comfort, and support others in their need. He even set up the third-tithe system to care for those truly in need. However, He is also a proponent of personal responsibility (II Thessalonians 3:10; I Timothy 5:8; Proverbs 12:24, 27; etc.). Notice Paul's admonition to the Thessalonians:

> But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more; that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and

> to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing. (I Thessalonians 4:10-12)

Where should charity end and personal responsibility begin?

Even in the land of self-reliance and rugged individualism, we live in a partial welfare state. Government and private handouts are common and relatively easy to get. Citizens can be propped up for long periods if they fit a certain category of need, such as being jobless, a single parent, handicapped, and the like. The nation provides "cushions" of all sorts to soften a person's landing when he falls. Sadly, other, more socialist nations are far ahead of the U.S. in this regard.

This has a short-term appeal, but it is regressive and spiritually dangerous over the long haul. Even though they feel a kind of shame for being on the dole, long-term welfare recipients develop an attitude of entitlement called the "welfare mentality." In time, they feel that they deserve help from others and become offended if they do not receive it. They also take offense if someone suggests that they should be looking for work or learning a new skill or weaning themselves off public/private assistance. Why should they? They are getting something for nothing!

The danger appears when this attitude begins to bleed over into a Christian's relationship with God. Sure, God's grace is freely given (Romans 3:24; 5:15), but does that mean He requires nothing of us in return? This is Protestantism at its best—or worse! True Christianity is not "give your heart to the Lord, and you shall be saved!" True Christianity is "Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15)!

Jesus packs so much into these few words! This "gospel in a nutshell" expands to include conscious effort to change and grow in the grace, knowledge, and character of God every waking moment of our day. Christianity is not a lazy-person's religion. It is a God-centered way of living that demands our constant attention so that we can "put on the new man" (Ephesians 4:17-32; Colossians 3:1-17) and "shine as lights in the world" (Philippians 2:15).

A welfare mentality—"the way of get," as Herbert Armstrong put it—is the antithesis of God's way of give, of outgoing concern, of esteeming others better than oneself. It can manifest itself in many forms of behavior: failure to recognize God-given blessings and opportunities to prosper, laziness, sponging off others, rarely helping or entertaining others, making excuses for one's financial state, expressing contempt for "menial" jobs when unemployed, having unrealistically high standards or expectations, etc. All these assume that we deserve something.

To put it bluntly, rather than others owing us something, the only thing we truly deserve is death (Romans 3:10-20, 23; 6:23)! If we are Christians, however, we have been forgiven and set on the right path toward God's Kingdom (Ephesians 2:1-10). To us God gives the promise that we need not worry about our life, food, or clothing (Luke 12:22-34). God will take care of us! David says, "I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread" (Psalm 37:25). Leave those worries behind! Receive with gladness and gratitude what God gives. Then we can concentrate our efforts on seeking His Kingdom and His righteousness, and part of that is ridding ourselves of the despicable and Satanic notion that we deserve a free ride. Therefore, "*work* out your own salvation in fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12)!

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

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government of God (John 18:36; I Corinthians 15:50), we need to respect the ministry as well as lay members, being subject to one another (I Corinthians 11:1). The operation of God's government absolutely depends upon each person governing himself, never going beyond the parameters of the authority God has given him.

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

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