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Response to Christopher Hays

Stephen Timms, MP

The notion that a core purpose of a national government is to focus on the condition of its poorest citizens has become a political norm. Christopher Hays's fascinating historical and biblical analysis shows how the idea of society caring for the poor had origins in the actions of the church and its members. The Early Church adapted and subverted ideas and institutions which were common at the time – voluntary associations, banqueting, benefaction, patronage – in order to pursue its calling.

From the very inception of the Christian Church, the Lord's Supper became a place where societal and class divisions were broken down, and that went a long way to break the notion that greater wealth conferred greater importance or value in society. At one stage, as Dr Hays explains, the Roman emperor felt obliged to provide welfare to the poor out of embarrassment that the Christians were supporting 'not only their own poor but ours as well'.¹

Dr Hays shows that Graeco-Roman society had a different approach to benefaction: to benefit the givers' own social status, rather than primarily to benefit the poor. Today, voluntary giving to the poor is to be encouraged and lauded. But state programmes and initiatives show how helping others less fortunate than yourself as a primary motivation for giving has been embraced and promoted by the modern institutions of government. Dr Hays does not argue that the church set out to change the mission of the state, but that was the powerful consequence of the church's setting about its mission.

No matter how selfless philanthropists are, or how effective charity relief programmes are, underlying institutional structures which perpetuate unequal outcomes will undermine their good intentions. Some Christians are sceptical about the ability of government to bring about effective social change and improvements to the lives of its poorest citizens. Believing that God is in ultimate power, some are more comfortable with welfare coming from benevolent believers than from the state. But this overlooks the scale of the challenge, how wide the reach of government is and its demonstrable potential to do good.

¹ Christopher Hays, 'The Early Church, The Roman State and Ancient Civil Society: Whose Responsibility Are the Poor?', in this volume.

Communication and collaboration between the state – in particular, at times, the local state – and the church need improvement. Both must realize the strengths and weaknesses of each other. The flexibility and dynamism of church organization can be complemented by the size of the state and its greater resources and reach.

Dr Hays is right to highlight the power of the poor and to show how the New Testament does so. In our system, policies and procedures are often directed to recipients without any discussion. This leads to policy mistakes and alienates the poor from politics. People must be seen and spoken to as people, not merely as an economic unit or a national insurance number. Solutions to economic injustice cannot be found just by talking to people – however well meaning – who have never experienced it. Listening to people who are experiencing injustice and understanding and valuing their insights and contributions are vital steps in eliminating structural poverty.