



RESPONSIBLE ACTION

Programs aimed at economic problems need a fully rounded understanding of how people flourish.



We have no shortage today of efforts to take action against economic problems. Our society has created countless thousands of programs to alleviate poverty, stimulate growth, and address other ills. They include programs run by churches, non-profits, corporations, government, and more. They arise from an admirable desire to improve the world, and many of them do so.

Unfortunately, while we have plenty of action, we don't have enough responsible action. Too many of our programs do more harm to our neighbors than good. The church must take action to help people, but it must do so with a profound sense of responsibility for the results. Mobilizing to "help" others is not virtuous if we don't care whether our actions actually help people, or even hurt them.

The shift (described in Element 9) from "How can we hand well-being to our neighbors?" to "How can we help create opportunity for our neighbors to build their own well-being with God?" implies that programs are not the most important issue. If we do not view our neighbors as creators and contributors, made for agency and responsibility, the programs we enact for their sake will demean them. If we are not building relationships and helping others build relationships, our programs will only help us reduce one another to objects.

Nonetheless, the programs still matter. Good programs cannot make up for a failure to put human dignity and relationships first. Our efforts to assist those in need and help our world flourish can start with the right mindset and still be defeated by poorly designed programs. In some cases a particular program may need to be abolished because there is no way to continue it while upholding dignity and building relationships. More often, however, what is urgently needed is reform, not revolution.

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And yet, let us make no mistake about the urgency of reform. Where the destructive idea that a program can hand well-being

to people takes hold, the result is always injustice. Cronyism, paternalism, debt, and dependency are the natural results.

On the other hand, a well-designed program that helps create opportunity can do a world of good for people who desperately need that opportunity. Consider the national system of material and relational assistance for the poor operated by the Mormons, which works so well that virtually no Mormons ever use government welfare systems – or remain on assistance for long periods when they could be working. In the civil domain, consider the Earned Income Tax Credit, which ties public assistance directly to work. Such programs, and many others, serve as a standing rebuke to the injustice of other programs that treat people as objects of pity to be manipulated rather than stewards with the potential to work alongside us.