

Open Letter to President Bush on the Faith Based Initiative

[This was published in the Visalia Times Delta and the Porterville Recorder on the Op-Ed page in the form of an open letter to George W. Bush. I authored the first draft and edited it in response to comments from the Meeting. It was approved as speaking for the Visalia Friends Meeting. – D.C.]

Submitted 2/20/2001

Dear President Bush:

This letter was drafted and approved to represent the voice of the Visalia Friends Meeting. It is also being published openly to inform the community and open the issues for dialogue.

The vital principle of "separation of church and state" grew out of the experience of early American Quakers and other minority religious groups. As Quakers in the modern world we are troubled that your administration appears ready to repudiate this historical principle through proposals known under the names "Charitable Choice" and "Faith-Based Initiative." We believe these measures will work to the detriment of both the churches and American democracy.

There are procedures already in place for legitimate charities founded by religious groups to receive government funding. Typically these are non-profit corporations established by religious groups, but run as independent entities subject to government standards and guidelines. Self Help Enterprises, which is active in the Visalia area, is a case in point. Self Help was founded by the Quakers, but it receives federal funding, and is consequently subject to government regulation. For instance it must abide by federal guidelines for nondiscrimination in hiring, and health and safety regulations. Its mission must also be a legitimate social service, not a covert means of evangelism or religious instruction. It cannot withhold its services based on the race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation of its clients. These restrictions are altogether proper.

We are concerned that your initiative is intent on going beyond this and funding religious groups directly. According to your own web site (www.governor.state.tx.us/Faith-Based/) your "Faith-Based Task Force" was instituted to recommend ways to "create an environment in which these groups can thrive, free of regulations that dilute the 'faith factor.'" On the same site you are quoted as saying, "In the final analysis, there is no overcoming anything without faith - be it drugs or alcohol or poverty or selfishness or flawed social policy." That is fine, as a statement of personal belief, but it does not justify tearing down the wall separating church and state.

Quakers, in particular, are acutely sensitive to the need for this separation. Thousands of early Quakers were imprisoned and many died at the hands of governments intent on supporting religion. The persecution was most fierce in England, but it carried over into the early American colonies. The colony of Rhode Island was founded as a haven for Baptists, fleeing the Puritans of Massachusetts. Maryland was founded as a haven for Catholics; Pennsylvania was founded as a haven for Quakers. America distinguished itself not as a "Christian nation"; all of Europe was aflame with Christianity, in its various forms. Our distinction is rather in embracing religious liberty, and hence religious diversity: the right of individuals to follow their own inner lights rather than submit to government-sanctioned forms of religion. Religious liberty is possible only where religion is strictly off limits for the government.

Our right to hold our own religious beliefs is compromised if we are compelled, through our tax dollars, to support religious institutions whose beliefs may contradict our own. Similarly, the rights of social service clients are compromised if they are not protected from religious indoctrination by their service providers. Remember, when we talk about religion in America we are talking about Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Wiccans, Hare Krishnas, Scientologists, Branch Davidians, Christian Identity (aka Aryan Nation)... and the list goes on. Some religions teach that members of other religions will go to Hell. Some religions are accused by other religions of being the embodiment of the anti-Christ. Some preach hate overtly, others covertly. Some are intolerant toward gays and lesbians. Some discriminate against women. Will certain religious groups be excluded from eligibility for government funding because of their beliefs? How can the government decide such questions without forsaking its commitment to religious liberty? Requiring that the money derived from government subsidies cannot be used for "sectarian worship, instruction or proselytization" begs the question. Federal money given to an institution for any particular purpose frees up money for all other activities and thus supports the institution as a whole.

We are concerned about the Faith-Based Initiative for another, very fundamental reason. We are concerned that the proposal that the government support religious charities is, at its base, an attempt to get the government out of the business of social services. Your Texas Governor web site bemoans the fact that since the 1960's the federal government has spent \$5.4 trillion on social services, which is equated there to fostering "government dependency." The real message is that there are trillions of dollars worth of legitimate social service needs to be met, and churches are not in a position, either by funding or by competence, to meet these needs. Trained professional workers simply cannot (and should not) be replaced with volunteer workers on this scale. The problems of society are deep and enduring and they should be met by society as a whole. If we can pay trillions of dollars to bail out the savings and loans, car manufacturers, or utility companies, forty years of social services for \$5.4 trillion is not such a bad deal.

We need to renew our national commitment to provide a social safety net that is strong and effective; one that honors, rather than belittles, those in need. We also need to reaffirm our commitment to religious liberty through separation of church and state. We therefore strongly urge you to reconsider these initiatives.