

# Evangelicals push back on proposed budget cuts

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(RNS) Balancing the federal budget at the expense of the poor would be un-Christian, evangelical leaders warned Congress on Thursday (March 3) as they work to reject proposed spending cuts to domestic and foreign aid.

"The Bible says that God has a special concern for the poor," said Ron Sider, president of the group Evangelicals for Social Action. "This is one of the central biblical teachings."

The evangelical leaders, convened by the left-leaning group Faith in Public Life, face an uphill challenge in trying to win over fellow evangelicals: a recent poll found that evangelicals are more likely than Americans overall to support cutting foreign aid while also supporting increased military spending.

While increasing numbers of evangelicals consider the budget deficit to be a moral problem -- citing biblical injunctions against debt -- Christians should consider raising taxes and cutting military spending before sacrificing aid to the poor, Sider said.

Humanitarian programs make up a tiny fraction of the federal budget -- less than 10 percent of foreign spending -- but they save millions of lives and improve America's standing in the world, said Michael Gerson, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and a former

speechwriter for President George W. Bush

"This type of aid is both a moral imperative but it's also in the interests of the United States," he said, adding that evangelical leaders have "an educational task here, to convince not just Christians but others that these commitments that we make, which are relatively inexpensive, serve our values and our interests."

Shane Claiborne, founder of the Philadelphia-based social justice group The Simple Way, called defense spending the "elephant in the room" while Congress considers cutting programs that provide anti-malaria mosquito nets for African communities.

Borrowing a line from the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Claiborne said a nation that spends more on the military than anti-poverty programs is "approaching spiritual doom."

Other prominent evangelicals supporting the campaign include Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary; Richard Cizik, president of the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good; Messiah College President Kim Phipps, and Florida megachurch pastor Joel Hunter, a former member of the White House faith-based advisory panel.

The Washington-based progressive Christian group Sojourners has spearheaded a similar "What Would Jesus Cut?" campaign that urges cuts in military spending while investing in programs for the needy.