Kindness and firmness were both essential. In 1898, the magazine *American Hebrew* told of how one man was sunk into dependency but a volunteer "with great patience convinced him that he must earn his living." Soon he did, and he regained the respect of his family and community. Similarly, a woman had become demoralized, but "for months she was worked with, now through kindness, again through discipline, until finally she began to show a desire to help herself."

Today, when an unmarried pregnant teenager is dumped by her boyfriend and abandoned by angry parents who refuse to be reconciled, she needs a haven, a room in a home with a volunteer family. When a single mom at the end of her rope cannot take care of a toddler, he should be placed quickly for adoption where a new and permanent bonding can take place, rather than rotated through a succession of foster homes.

Categorization

A century ago, charities realized that two persons in exactly the same material circumstances but with different values need different treatment: One might benefit most from some material help and a pat on the back; the other might need spiritual challenge and a push. Those who were orphaned, elderly, or disabled received aid. Jobless adults who were "able and willing to work" received help in job-finding. Those who preferred "to live on alms" and those of "confirmed intemperance" were not entitled to material assistance.

"Work tests" helped both in sorting and in providing relief with dignity. When an able-bodied man came to a homeless shelter, he often was asked to chop wood for two hours or whitewash a building; in that way he could provide part of his own support and also help those unable to perform these chores. A needy woman generally was given a seat in the "sewing room" (often near a child care room) and asked to work on garments that would be donated to the helpless poor or sent through the Red Cross to families suffering from the effects of hurricanes, floods, or other natural disasters. The work test, along with teaching good habits and keeping away those who did not really need help, also enabled charities to teach the lesson that those who were being helped could help others.

Today, we need to stop talking about "the poor" in abstraction and start distinguishing once again between those who truly yearn for help and those who just want an enabler. Programs have the chance to succeed only when categories are established and firmly maintained. Work tests can help: Why shouldn't some homeless men clean up streets and parks and remove graffiti? Now, as thousands of crack babies (born addicted to cocaine and often deserted by mothers who care only for the next high) languish in hospitals and shelters under bright lights with almost no human contact. Shouldn't homeless women (those who are healthy and gentle) be assigned to hold a baby for an hour in exchange for food and shelter?

Discernment

"Intelligent giving and intelligent withholding are alike true charity," the New Orleans Charity Organization Society declared in 1899. It added, "If drink has made a man poor, money will feed not him, but his drunkenness." Poverty-fighters a century ago trained volunteers to leave behind "a conventional attitude toward the poor, seeing them through the comfortable haze of our own intentions." Barriers against fraud were important not only to prevent waste but to preserve morale among those who *were* working hard to remain independent: "Nothing," declared the Society, "is more demoralizing to the struggling poor than successes of the indolent."

Bad charity also created uncertainty among givers as to how their contributions would be used and thus led to less giving over the long term. It was important to "reform those mild, well-meaning, tender-hearted, sweet-voiced criminals who insist upon indulging in indiscriminate charity." Compassion was greatest when givers could "work with safety, confidence, and liberty." Today, lack of discernment in helping poor individuals is rapidly producing an anti-compassion backlash, as the better-off, unable to distinguish between the truly needy and the "grubby-grabby," give to neither.

Employment

Nineteenth-century New York charity leader Josephine Lowell wrote that "the problem before those who would be charitable is not how to deal with a given number of the poor; it is how to help those who are poor without adding to their numbers and constantly increasing the evils they seek to cure." If people were paid for not working, the number of non-workers would increase, and children would grow up without seeing work as a natural and essential part of life. Individuals had to accept responsibility: Governmental programs operating without the discipline of the marketplace were inherently flawed, because their payout came "from what is regarded as a practically inexhaustible source, and people who once receive it are likely to regard it as a right, as a permanent pension, implying no obligation on their part."

In the twentieth century and beyond, programs that stress employment, sometimes in creative ways, need new emphasis. For example, instead of temporary housing, more of the able-bodied might receive the opportunity to work for a permanent home through "sweat equity" arrangements in which labor constitutes most of the down payment. Some who start in rigorous programs of this sort drop out with complaints that too much sweat is required, but one person who stayed in such a program said at the end, "We are poor, but we have something that is ours. When you use your own blood, sweat, and tears, it's part of your soul. You stand and say, 'I did it.' "

Freedom

Charity workers a century ago did not press for governmental programs, but instead showed poor people how to move up while resisting enslavement to governmental masters. Job freedom was the opportunity to drive a wagon without paying bribes, to cut hair without having to go to barber college, and to get a foot on the lowest rung of the ladder, even if wages there were low. Freedom was the opportunity for a family to escape dire poverty by having a father work long hours and a mother sew garments at home. Life was hard, but static, multi-generational poverty of the kind we now have was rare; those who persevered could star in a motion picture of upward mobility.

Today, in our desire to make the bottom rung of the economic ladder higher, we have cut off the lowest rungs and left many on the ground. Those who are pounding the pavements looking for work, and those who have fallen between the cracks, are hindered by what is supposed to help them. Mother Teresa's plan to open a homeless shelter in New York was stopped by a building code that required an elevator; nuns in her order said that they would carry upstairs anyone who could not walk, but the city stuck to its guns and the shelter never opened. In Texas and New Mexico, a Bible-based anti-drug program run by Victory Fellowship has a 60 percent success rate in beating addiction, yet the Commission on Drug and Alcohol Abuse has instructed the program to stop calling itself one of "drug rehabilitation" because it does not conform to bureaucratic standards.

God

"True philanthropy must take into account spiritual as well as physical needs," poverty-fighters a century ago noted, and both Christians and Jews did. Bible-believing Christians worshiped a God who came to earth and showed in life and death the literal meaning of compassion–*suffering with*. Jewish teaching stressed the pursuit of righteousness through the doing of good deeds. Groups such as the Industrial Christian Alliance noted that they used "religious methods"–reminding the poor that God made them and had high expectations for them–to "restore the fallen and helpless to self-respect and self-support."

Today, the challenge that goes beyond the material is still essential to poverty-fighting. In Washington, D.C., multimillion-dollar programs have failed, but, a mile from the U.S. Capitol, success stories are developing: spiritually-based programs such as Clean and Sober Streets, where ex-alcoholics and ex-addicts help those still in captivity; the Gospel Mission, which fights homelessness by offering true hope; and the Capitol Hill Crisis Pregnancy Center, where teenage moms and their born and unborn children are cared for. They are all saving lives. In Dallas, Texas, a half-mile from the Dallas Housing Authority's failed projects, a neighborhood group called Voice of Hope invites teenagers to learn about God through Bible studies and to work at remodeling deteriorated homes in their neighborhood. During the past decade, crime rates among the boys involved with Voice of Hope and pregnancy rates among the girls have been dramatically lower than those in the surrounding community.

Changing Our Methods of Fighting Poverty

We need to change our methods of fighting poverty, but we need to be clear about the reasons for change. Government welfare programs should be replaced not because they are too expensive–although, clearly, much money is wasted–but because they are inevitably too stingy in providing what is truly important: the treatment of people as human beings made in God's image, not as animals to be fed and caged.

Private charities can do a better job than government, but only if they practice the principles of effective compassion. *Giving*, by itself, we need to remember, is morally neutral. We need to give *rightly*, so as not to impede the development of values that enable people to get out of poverty and stay out. Only when the seven principles of effective compassion noted above are widely understood and practiced can anti-poverty work succeed. In 1995, as in 1895, the best programs offer challenge, not just enabling, and they deal with spiritual questions as well as material needs. In 1995, as in 1895, there is no effective substitute for the hard process of one person helping another. And the century-old question–Does any given "scheme of help...make great demands on men to give themselves to their brethren?"–is still the right one to ask. ♠