

Toward a Theology of Compassion: A Grammatical Projection

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Any credible reflection, theological or otherwise, on compassion is made more difficult in light of contemporary thought. The shift in paradigms, from the modern to the postmodern world is an event of crucial significance. No one would attempt to argue that at some precise point a paradigm shift took place as if one door closed and another opened. In fact, modernity has proven to be a tenacious reality in our time. Some have referred to our time as a “post-age,”¹ that is postmodern, poststructuralist, and even post-Christian. The modern world with its Cartesian self was able to make distinctions between the extended self (body) and the unextended self (mind). Such an understanding allows a nearly complete separation between a public and private life. The ability to separate fact and meaning, form and content, morality and faith have dramatically affected the way people see things. Some are beginning to question these assumptions and they are pointing in another direction.

The intellectual turbulence of time has had at least one detectable implication, the loss of compassion. We are led to a daily feeding on the miseries of others. Tragedy becomes comedy on the lips and in the minds of our “compassion-less” time. This loss is often perceptible, even in the church. Propositions and positions statements are no substitute for Christian compassion. Our ambivalence has also led to a kind of moral sentimentality, which only pretends to be compassion. Perhaps, the sheer quantity of misery coupled with the intellectual ambiguity of the time threatens to turn the church, as it has already done with society, into an association nearly incapable of empathizing with others. I will argue that such a fate is not necessary for those of who live with the vision of holiness of heart and life.

This essay will radiate around two concerns. First, I will look at three contemporary voices, which are attempting to critique some of the assumptions of modern ethics, including some modern Christian ethics. These three men are only representatives, but they are some of the more creative and helpful in this “post-age”. Second, I will attempt to sketch out the fundamental parameters for a theology of compassion. It is important to see the problems, but it is even more important to know how to “go on”. Therefore, it should be noted at the outset that the tenor of this essay is hopeful. It is a hope informed by a deep confidence that the way we have thought about the relationship between Christian morality and Christian theology is in need of reconstruction.

¹Terrence Tilley uses this term in Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), vi-x.

Three Voices: MacIntyre, Hauerwas, and Milbank

Three individuals have called into question the modernist assumptions of much ethical reflection. Each of these men offers a critique, but even more importantly they point to another pathway. If we are to take seriously the task of setting forth a theology of compassion, we must look carefully at these three men. They offer the opportunity to “think-again” about the most fundamental aspects of the Christian faith. Richard Bernstein indicates a measure of this philosophical ferment:

It should be clear that I reject foundationalism in its multifarious forms. I not only reject that philosophy itself can be grounded on permanent foundations and that philosophy itself is a foundational discipline, an arbitrator for the rest of culture; I also reject the idea that history – in all of its forms – is or can be a foundational discipline, that answers the questions we ask in philosophy . . . And this impulse and the task it sets for us – although it may be suppressed or repressed – has itself an uncanny way of reasserting itself, even when it appears most moribund.²

The philosophical situation Bernstein indicates can be decried or it can be affirmed, but it must be acknowledged. It is undoubtedly a reality, which can be reflected, in most theological discourse, even in the Church of the Nazarene.

1. After Virtue. Alasdair MacIntyre, who is professor of philosophy at Duke University, is a relentless critic of the failed Enlightenment project. He has written many books and articles, which have contributed to a reconsideration of moral theory. Early in his book entitled After Virtue, he says, “A central thesis of this book is that the breakdown of this project [Enlightenment] provided the historical background against which the predicaments of our own culture can become intelligible”.³ He is talking about the attempt to secure morality in universal/rational principles. The result of this has been to separate morality from culture, occasion, history, etc. This kind of separation has led to an unhealthy climate in which to make important moral choices. It has led some to conclude that the only possible form of moral theory is emotivism. He argues that this kind of moral thinking will not work, it has in fact failed as a viable theory.

MacIntyre argues that, “man is in his actions and practice, as well as his fictions, is essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth”.⁴ This suggests that morality emerges from those habits and practices which guide life through its many twists and turns. The disembodied principle, which has nourished the individualism of modern ethics, cannot

²Richard J. Bernstein, The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992, 1995), 28.

³Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory. Second Edition. (Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, 1984), 39.

⁴*Ibid.*, 216.

be finally justified according to MacIntyre. If he is right, then another account of moral theory must be suggested. He argues that habits and practices offer such a pathway.⁵

2. A Community of Character. Stanley Hauerwas is one of the most provocative voices in the church today. His energy and insight have unquestionably changed the theological landscape of the church. Hauerwas, who teaches at Duke Divinity School, is also a vigorous critic of the way in which many have unconsciously or carelessly bought into the assumptions of liberal/democratic society. He expresses this very sentiment in one of his many books, "to make the metaphysics of liberation central or overriding as a description of the nature of Christian existence, as is done in much of liberation theology, is a mistake, given the background of much of our recent intellectual and political history".⁶ He doubts these assumptions will be of much service to the church, they may in fact, be quite dangerous. He looks instead to the underlying narratives of the Christian community for the formation of character. He talks about the importance of a truthful narrative that will help engender the kind of character capable of freedom, justice, compassion, and liberation.⁷ The truthfulness of Christian claims about such things as compassion is not dependent upon rational justification, but the kind of character emerging from Christian community. In other words, compassion emerges from the character of a person formed by truthful narrative. This is the task of the church as a community of character.

Hauerwas writes eloquently regarding his understanding of the church: the truthfulness of Christian convictions resides in their power to form a people sufficient to acknowledge the divided character of the world and thus necessarily ready to offer hospitality to the stranger. They must be what they are, i.e., the church, exactly because the story of God that has formed them requires them to understand and acknowledge the divided character of the world. The task of Christians is not, therefore, to demonstrate that all possible positions are false though critical questions . . . but to be a witness to the God that they believe embraces all truth.⁸

This should suggest the alternative epistemology embraced by Hauerwas. Rational grounds do not justify compassion; rather the lives of those people who are formed by the truth are the justification. The church is the community called into being by the Spirit

⁵MacIntyre says, "By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended." After Virtue, 187.

⁶Stanley Hauerwas, After Christendom? How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 55.

⁷Stanley Hauerwas, Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World and Living In Between (Durham, North Carolina: The Labyrinth Press, 1988), 29.

⁸Stanley Hauerwas, A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic (Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 93-94.

and the preaching of the Word and nourished by the habits and practices in order to form the character of those willing to embrace the adventure.

3. The Word Made Strange. John Milbank, a lecturer in theology at the University of Cambridge, moves with ease through theology, philosophy, and sociology. He points to a “ontology of violence” which lies at the root of secular reason. This is problematic to the extent that much theology, and in particular liberalism, has bought into the assumptions of secular reason. Because of this he talks about the need for the theologian to perform the task “of redeeming estrangement; the theologian alone must perpetuate that original making strange which is the divine assumption of human flesh, not to confirm it, but to show it again as it surprisingly is”⁹ He asks a question later in the book, which seems deceptively simple, “Can morality be Christian”? He answers in the following way, “Let me tell you the answer straightaway. It is no. Not ‘no’ there cannot be a specifically Christian morality. But no, morality cannot be Christian”.¹⁰ While this response is shocking, it is linked to his general critique of liberalism. This is evident in his earlier book entitled, Theology and Social Theory.

It is not possible to trace the many nuances of Milbank’s theological critique at this point. It is only possible to look at his analysis in the broadest possible terms. His point comes through clearly in the last chapter of his Social Theory where he says; “The task of such a theology is not apologetic, not even argument. Rather it is to tell again the Christian *mythos*, pronounce again the Christian *logos*, and call again for Christian *praxis* in a manner that restores their freshness and originality. It must articulate Christian difference in such a way as to make it strange”.¹¹ He goes on to talk about “Counter-Ethics,” in which he argues for an Augustinian point of view. He can make this claim because, “it implies both that the part belongs to the whole, and that each part transcends any imaginable whole, because the whole is only a finite series which continues indefinitely towards an infinite and unfathomable God”.¹²

These three important theologians have pointed to some of the obstacles, which stand in the way of a helpful theology of compassion. Their analysis points to the way in which the search for justice, compassion, and liberation within the church can attempt to find a foundation upon which they can rest. And it is in this search that the church can run the risk of making compassion a liberal notion of universally established ideals. These men also suggest that often our search for a theology of compassion can rest upon rational justifications, instead of the habits and practices, which finally engender compassion. These men also question the autonomous self, which is assumed by modern ethics. They point to the socially constructed self and the accompanying need for community. Finally, they question the tendency of the church to make sense of the world. They wonder if such a task is a worthy goal at all.

⁹John Milbank, The Word Made Strange: Theology, Culture, Language (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 1.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 219.

¹¹John Milbank, Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1990, 1993), 381.

¹²*Ibid.*, 405.

Embodying Compassion

We have considered some of the questions, which form the theological and philosophical critique of MacIntyre, Hauerwas, and Milbank. The intellectual power of these contributions has without question made it more likely that a reconstruction of compassion will actually succeed. This is the task to which we will now turn. The pathway, which I will suggest is dependent upon what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls grammatical investigation. This method requires us to look for how compassion is embodied in the forms of life engendered by Christian practice. When we do this, two things will happen, first, we will understand and second, we will be able to go on. Wittgenstein says, "But there is also this use of the word 'to know': we say 'Now I know it!' - and similarly 'Now I can do it!' and 'Now I understand'" (PI 151)!¹³ Understanding is the result of a "grammatical investigation". The point that he wants to make is that understanding is more than getting hold of a formula. He says, "Try not to think of understanding as a 'mental process' at all - For that is the expression which confuses you. But ask yourself: in what sort of case, in what kind of circumstances, do you say, 'Now I know how to go on,' when, that is, the formula has occurred to me" (PI 154).¹⁴ He adds:

Thus what I wanted to say was: he suddenly knew how to go on, when he understood the principle, then possibly he had a special experience - and he is asked: 'What was it? What took place when you suddenly grasped the principle?' perhaps he will describe it much as we described it above - but for us it is the circumstances under which he has such an experience that justify him in saying in such a case that he understands, that he knows how to go on (PI 155).¹⁵

Theology is grammar according to Wittgenstein. I take this to mean that theology and for that matter understanding takes place within a complex of activities. Therefore, a theology of compassion requires a grammatical projection of sorts. That is, compassion must be understood within the habits and practices of the Christian faith. Finally, a grammatical projection will help us to go on. This means that understanding compassion is not purely a matter of thinking, but of life, it is embedded in the forms of life.

1. The Triune God. All theological reflection begins and ends in the worship of a triune God. Therefore, a theology of compassion is first of all the worship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. According to the Geoffrey Wainwright, "Christian ethics is the confession of faith in praxis".¹⁶ It is the fundamentally Christian affirmation that God exists as a being-in-communion, which offers vision and conviction to the Christian life. Compassion, therefore, begins in the life of a God who "lives as the loving friendships,

¹³ Ludwig-Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations. Third Edition. translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1953, 1958), 59.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 61

¹⁶ Geoffrey Wainwright, Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 431.

the self-giving relationships, of Father, Son and Holy Spirit".¹⁷ Grammatically considered compassion is first a doxological reflection on the God who exists in relation while reaching toward humankind. According to Jones, "God's desire for communion with Creation leads God, as a sign of mercy, to draw human history into God's life".¹⁸

Jurgen Moltmann says, "We are not theologians because we are particularly religious; we are theologians because in the face of this world we miss God".¹⁹ This suggests that compassion, in order to be genuine, arises from our need for God to sustain our life together. If we take what Moltmann is saying seriously, it seems that we will come to see that compassion does not exist as some disembodied duty or holy teleos for the Christian. Therefore, if we are to find the meaning of compassion it will be in the worship of a triune God. According to Milbank:

The harmony of the Trinity is therefore, not the harmony of a finished totality but a 'musical' harmony of infinity. Just as an infinite God must be power-act, so the doctrine of the Trinity discovers the infinite God to include a radically 'external' relationality. Thus God can only speak to us simultaneously as the Word incarnate, and as the indefinite spiritual response, in time, which is the Church.²⁰

Compassion will not be found in a therapeutic model of Christianity, which can only be sustained by an association of persons seeking to find vision in human need or Christian responsibility. Such a situation is really an attempt to treat compassion as a duty, which comes from the outside. A grammatical understanding begins to see that compassion arises in the worship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

2. Truthfulness. Even as compassion arises from a sense of the triune God, it finds its initial embodiment in a commitment to truthfulness. Truth is not so much a choice as it is a result of character. The key to compassion is to be found in a character formed by the truth. This is from the very start a rejection of the autonomous self. Going back to the importance of seeing God as a being-in-communion who creates humankind as a being-in-relation, it becomes abundantly clear that autonomy is an illusion, a dangerous illusion. The truth comes to human beings when they are lost in the illusion of self-sufficiency. It is that strange Word which Milbank says is the fundamental task of the theologian in our time. The strangeness is in part to be accounted for in the call to community in a time of alienation. It is also evident in the willingness to look beyond the façade, which often hides the truly important. The truth is not always pleasant, at least at first, but it is part of the redeeming presence that is evident in the first movement of compassion.

¹⁷L. Gregory Jones, Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 112.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁹Jurgen Moltmann, A Passion for God's Reign, edited by Miroslav Volf (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 2.

²⁰Milbank, Social Theory, 424.

Long before we learn our first word, much less begin to speak sentences, our character is being formed. Character gives a person a 'nose' for the truth. One is prepared for moral discernment by being formed in truthfulness. It is clear that a commitment to truthfulness requires courage and patience. Hauerwas puts it plainly:

The emphasis on narrative, therefore, is not first a claim about the narrative quality of experience from some unspecified standpoint, but rather is an attempt to draw our attention to where the story is told, namely in the church; how the story is told, namely, in faithfulness to Scripture; and who tells the story, namely, the whole church through the office of the preacher.²¹

Several important issues come into focus in this statement. First, we come into our humanity, not as a natural endowment, but through the truthful narrative. Second, we are given in the church God's way of forming us in the truth. Third, the Scripture must be heard again as that narrative which reminds us that we are not the object of the story, rather it is God. Fourth, the importance of the preacher is affirmed and with it the work of helping people see again the primary task of ministry, helping others see the truth. Finally, while it is not explicitly said, the importance of the Spirit who moves in the church as the envisioner of grace and as the movement toward compassion under girds everything..

The practice of the truth which helps us embody compassion is sustained in the instituted sacramental life of the church. It is in this way that we begin to "unlearn our habit of sin".²² Baptism teaches us who we are and the Eucharist reminds us of our past as it points to our real hope. The sacramental life of the church is shaped in the recognition of divine grace. It is the way in which our identity becomes evident as our destiny is envisioned. Wainwright says, "Where divine grace is met by human gratitude, the gratitude is truly expressed in free service to brother, sister and neighbour, and the chorus of thanksgiving resounds to the glory of God at the approach of his kingdom of justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit".²³ It should be evident that the importance of truth as it is sustained through the instituted sacraments resides in its "Spirit engendered" concreteness.

The sacramental life of the church embraces the church. It is because of this that it reaches to a world that needs to know that it is the world. Hauerwas says, "For the church to be, rather than have, a social ethic means we must recapture the social significance of common behavior, such as acts of kindness, friendship, and the formation of families".²⁴ In other words, the sacramental life of the church is an important key to the grammar of compassion. It is the visible re-narrating of life through the lens of a triune God. Milbank talks about Christian "moral practice embedded in the historical emergence of a new, and unique community . . . situated in the re-narration of Christian

²¹Hauerwas, Christian Existence Today, 61.

²²Jones, 76.

²³Wainwright, 433.

²⁴Hauerwas, A Community of Character, 11.

emergence”²⁵ Of course, the narrative is an outgrowth of the story of a triune God sustained in the church and the practice of truth. In other words, as Hauerwas says, “We must be a community with the patience, amid the division and hatreds of this world, to take the time to nurture friendships, to serve the neighbor, and to give and receive the thousand small acts of care which ultimately are the heart blood of the Kingdom”²⁶

3. Sanctification. The final movement in our grammatical projection of compassion is a consideration of sanctification. The importance of this grand doctrine of the holiness movement and the Church of the Nazarene may in fact turn out to be our true genius. It may help us realize the best of our theological heritage as it points to the future. The Holiness movement has continued to believe that the grace of God is sufficient to cleanse the heart, nourish our relationship with God, and empower us to service. If there has been a fault line in this theological affirmation it has been the tendency to be captured in the liberal democratic assumptions regarding selfhood. When the self is construed atomistically, especially regarding sin and grace, the real genius of sanctification runs the risk of being lost. When we continue to think of sanctification as a personal victory over a mountain of sin, inherited and actual, we lose sight of what is really important about holiness. All too often it seems ‘holiness folk’ tend to get locked into holiness ethics and lose sight of a holy God. We tend to seek security in lifestyle and miss our mutual dependence on God. We begin to seek an experience instead of a God who is being-in-communion. We may seek our confidence in rigorous standards, then through time place the standards first, instead of Spirit engendered praxis. Sanctification is an important key to understanding a theology of compassion.

Sanctification is crucial for the plain fact that in a ‘post-age’ there is no doctrine, no dictionary, and no foundation sufficient to establish the truth claims of the Christian faith. This surely means that a grammatical projection of compassion will require a full accounting of holiness. Milbank says, “The Church, to be the Church, must seek to extend the sphere of socially, aesthetic harmony”²⁷ Moltmann puts it even more plainly, “So sanctification of life includes the healing of life that is sick, and the becoming-whole of a life that has become divided and split. Life becomes holy if it has become whole and complete. So sanctifying thinking is ‘holistic’ thinking”.²⁸ Grammatically formed holiness will take full regard of the triune God and the truthful narrative, or put more plainly the Spirit engendered culture that is the church.

The emphasis on holiness for understanding compassion is important for many reasons. First, it reminds us that as the people of God we are pilgrims, some might say “Resident Aliens” or even “Exodus people”. We are people on the way to God’s future. We are not seeking to establish a kingdom on earth. Liberty, fraternity, and equality, which seem so obviously linked to the Enlightenment, cannot hope to engender compassion beyond some intellectual or moral consensus. As exodus people we know that our conscience may mislead us, but our confidence when placed in the triune God

²⁵Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, 381.

²⁶Hauerwas, Christian Existence Today, 105.

²⁷Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, 422.

²⁸Moltmann, A Passion for God’s Reign, 54.

can form us into a peculiar people. Second, it reminds us of our eschatologically framed journey. It is not a hope, which presumes nor it is a hope lost in despair. It is not stranded in an understanding of the Christian life, which detaches one from the difficulties of life. An eschatologically informed faith understands that the hope of the gospel does not deny the present as much as it frames it in an optimism of grace. Third, it reminds us that worship is not merely a segmented span of time when we sing, pray, and listen/preach. Rather worship is a description of the character of life when it is lived in community. Wainwright reminds us that “the world is not an easy place in which to live doxologically”.²⁹ Yet, when life is so lived it is the best, if not only justification of our claims about the truth and compassion.

A grammatical projection of compassion arises out of the worship of a triune God, begins to find embodiment in truthfulness, and is finally justified in holiness. Moltmann suggests that theology is about a “passion for God’s kingdom” and “God’s love of life”.³⁰ If we are to sustain compassion in our time it will be through our worship of the triune God which is formed by the truth and incarnated in a community of character as it returns to the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Compassion does not hang in empty space and it is not a rationally defined and justified virtue. It is not about securing self-worth or individual rights, neither is it about how we feel. Compassion is, in fact, about “the experience of the Spirit (which) leads to such a new experience of the self that we have to talk about the birth of a new life”.³¹ This new life is capable of what Thomas McCullough calls a “moral imagination”. He is talking here about the capacity “to empathize with others and to discern creative possibilities for ethical action”.³² This is the only possible when we understand that embodying compassion is a doxological enterprise.

Ludwig Wittgenstein is a towering philosophical voice in the twentieth-century. The work he did toward the end of his life, most of which is reconstructed from the notes of students and his unfinished manuscripts is of the most significance for theological reflection. He writes something in a little book entitled Culture and Value, which helps me to conclude this grammatical projection:

A proof of God’s existence ought to be something by means of which one could convince oneself that God exists. But I think that what believers who have furnished such proofs have wanted to do is give ‘belief’, an intellectual analysis and foundation, although they themselves would never have come to believe as a result of such proofs. Perhaps, one could ‘convince someone that God exists’ by means of a certain kind of upbringing, by shaping his life in such and such a way.³³

²⁹Wainwright, 415.

³⁰Moltmann, A Passion for God’s Reign, 2.

³¹Jurgen Moltmann, The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life (Great Britain: Fortress Press, 1997), 27.

³²Thomas E. McCollough, The Moral Imagination and Public Life: Raising the Ethical Question (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, Inc, 1991), 16.

While the specific point that he is making relates to proving the existence of God, it seems to relate to our current concern. Compassion is not about pointing to proofs, or building carefully crafted arguments based on rationality, nor it is about saying “look there is a compassionate deed”. Compassion is about introducing a person to a new way of being in the world engendered by the Word and the Spirit as it is nourished by truthfulness, patience, and sacramental life. It is not about isolating a word and linking it to some transcendently secure meaning. We will be able to “go on” as a compassionate people only as it is understood to be a gesture of a truthful story.

³³Ludwig Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, translated by Peter Winch (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977, 1980), 85.