

Summary of Theological Papers
Compassionate Ministry Conference
Colorado Springs, Colorado
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by John A. Knight

This has been a truly remarkable day. We have been stimulated and challenged to think seriously about a worthy topic and enterprise, namely Christian compassion. The presenters of the papers we have been privileged to hear have brought to bear their academic skills and insights onto a vital part of the Christian life. Having given virtually a full day to this kind of intellectual exercise, we may even be a bit bewildered as to what our response is or should be.

The speakers we have heard, having come out of the teaching arena, are accustomed to a variety of responses from their students or hearers. Recently I ran across the following description, depicting the responses of Jesus' disciples to his instruction:

"Then Jesus took his disciples up the mountain and gathering them around him, He taught them saying,

Blessed are the poor in spirit...
Blessed are the gentle...
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...
Blessed are the pure in heart...
Blessed are the merciful...
Blessed are you when persecuted...
Blessed are you when you suffer...

Then Simon Peter said, 'Do we have to write this down?'
And Andrew said, 'Are we supposed to know this?'
And James said, 'Will we have a test on it?'
And Phillip said, 'What if we don't know it?'
And Bartholomew said, 'Do we have to turn this in?'
And John said, 'The other disciples didn't have to learn this.'
And Matthew said, 'When do we get out of here?'
And Judas said, 'What does this have to do with real life?'

Then one of the Pharisees present asked to see Jesus' lesson plans and inquired of Jesus his terminal objectives in the cognitive domain.

And Jesus wept...."

I am quite certain that this audience, having come here by choice and on purpose, has experienced more mature responses than those just cited. This is not to say that we understand what our presenters have said in the same degree that they understand it. I confess — you need

not do so — that here and there I needed to exercise a greater focus and engage a little more brain power in order to achieve a minimal comprehension. This is a profitable endeavor.

Mark Twain (or somebody) reputedly said, "It isn't the things about the Bible that I don't understand that bother me, but the things I do understand all too well." This describes a part of how I feel about what I have heard today. Our speakers have spoken with precision and clarity as they challenged our minds; but they also have spoken poignantly about our opportunities to live out the life of Christ in compassionate ministry to all who are in need.

Several impressions have been formed in my thoughts as I have listened today. First, I am grateful that God has given to the Church of the Nazarene, and to the larger Wesleyan/holiness community, informed personnel who have the capacity to enlighten others and to challenge our sometimes narrow and provincial ways of understanding. The personnel and presentations we have heard today have accomplished this noble aim.

Secondly, I am thankful for a Church that acknowledges the need for this kind of interaction and dialogue, and encourages it by helping make possible conferences like this one. We are indebted to Dr. Jerry Lambert, Commissioner of Education, and Dr. Tom Nees, Director of Compassionate Ministries, and their helpers for putting together this needed and helpful occasion to exchange ideas and be challenged by the ministries of each other.

After reading again the original plan for the program at this conference, and after hearing our speakers, I am struck by the way they have been faithful to the suggested scheme of thought and emphasis. Each has beautifully filled in his/her particular piece of the "puzzle" as together we seek to provide a biblical and theological foundation for the developing sense of compassionate ministries within our ecclesiastical tradition.

The first paper by Daniel Spross and Jan Wright focuses on God's just vision for creation in the Book of Revelation, and traces the concern that individuals and groups side with God who is a God of justice and compassion, rather than with the powers of the secular age. The presentation opens up for us a new possibility for interpreting the Book of Revelation. There is no question that this method of reading is preferable to that employed by many Christians who view this book as a series of events depicting the end-times and the ultimate destruction of all the enemies of God. Spross and Wright view the book as the revelation, the apocalypse, of Jesus Christ.

The three strategies suggested for reading the Book of Revelation I find fascinating. "First, the Book of Revelation may be read as a prayer for justice, a plea to God against military and economic violence directed against God's creation and especially, God's people." "A second strategy for reading the Book of Revelation is.....as the hope for vindication of the faithful." According to the presenters, "compassion, arising out of prayer for justice, is sustained by hope for the vindication of God's reign over the earth through the Lion who is a Lamb." Further, the

Book of Revelation "may be read as a call to passive resistance, a solidarity with those who suffer under the powers of the age."

Using these strategies, "the key to reading becomes suffering with those who suffer in behalf of righteousness in hope of God's ultimate triumph over evil — a virtue near, if not at the center of the Christian virtue of compassion." The thesis that Spross and Wright advance is that the Book of Revelation can provide a theological basis from which compassionate ministry can emerge.

Whether the thesis can be defended must be answered by the scholars who must investigate the exegetical, hermeneutical, and theological aspects of the text, and specifically look for parallels with the Christological understanding presented in the Gospels. In the meantime, while we await these answers we definitely have a creative and insightful new way of interpreting the Book of Revelation.

Randy Maddox in his paper "Visit the Poor — Wesley, the Poor, and the Sanctification of Believers" — seeks to correct some of the erroneous interpretations of the way Wesley related deeds of mercy and compassion to other aspects of his thought and practice, particularly to his doctrinal teachings. Maddox attempts to show how Wesley's doctrine of sanctification was tied to affectional change/transformation as a result of engagement in Christian and specifically Methodist practices. He specifically investigates the relationship between the Methodist practices concerning the poor as they relate to the Wesleyan doctrine and experience of sanctification. An effort is made to show the crucial tie between Wesley's practices concerning the poor and his central theological, doctrinal, and pastoral concerns.

Maddox makes a significant point in pointing out Wesley's insistence on a "holistic" ministry, that is, that saving souls and ministering to the needy go together. For Wesley, Christ's ministry to the temporal and physical needs of people was an integral part, not merely an instrumental means, of his saving work. Consequently, it is not enough to minister only to people's physical needs.

For Wesley, "works of mercy are always grounded in God's gracious transforming work in our lives." Therefore, deeds of mercy necessarily follow being "infused" with holiness, but these are done voluntarily.

Of particular interest to me is the idea of Wesley that deeds of mercy can be a means of grace, forming, shaping, and empowering the life of holiness. These are not mere duties for the Christian, but means to holiness. Maddox makes a strong and much needed appeal to follow Wesley in weaving engagement with the poor integrally into our model of holiness of heart and life.

Stan Ingersol and Harold Raser in their two papers, "Ministering to Body as Well as Spirit: The Transformation of Nazarene Social Ministry, 1925-1970", and "Beating Back the

Amnesia: Love for Neighbor in the Church of the Nazarene, 1975-1998", have provided valuable insight into the historical developments of compassionate ministry in the Church of the Nazarene. The former has reviewed the period 1925-1975, and the latter 1975 to the present.

Ingersol observed that the nature of early Nazarene social ministries was often temporary or transient, although the humanitarian impulse was associated with the call to holy living by our founders. He observes that Nazarene social ministries have moved through three stages which overlap. 1) The "family enterprise" stage, dominant until about 1925. That is, social ministries were founded and operated by a specific couple or family. 2) The initial institutionalized compassionate ministries which emerged in the 1920's, when medical work was incorporated into the cross-cultural missions program of the church (Examples are teaching hospitals both in North America and in other parts of the world). 3) A more comprehensive institutionalization of social ministries beginning in the 1980's, with the development of Nazarene Compassionate Ministries USA/Canada and the proliferation of district and congregation-based social ministries around the world.

Ingersol suggests that these phases correspond to distinct periods in the "larger Nazarene story," and identifies five such periods in our history. He then cites historical evidence to determine why the intensity and form of compassionate ministries varied and changed across the years. In the period from 1945 to 1970 the church seemed to forget the broad pattern of social ministry that characterized the era of the church's founders, and even tended to think of medical work as missions and not "social work."

Harold Raser in his paper picks up on the idea of the church's "forgetting" her heritage of compassion.. He dramatizes the ways the church succumbed to "amnesia" beginning very early in her history. He notes that even in Bresee's time the call of the church was "expanded" to include other goals in addition to compassion for the poor. Coupled with this was an "upward mobility" of our early Nazarenes, which apparently was not opposed by Bresee. Nazarenes began to have little association with marginalized people. Further, amnesia developed by the process of "institutionalization", which included the identification of theological and behavioral boundaries. In addition the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy of the early decades of this century contributed to the "slide into amnesia". As a result the cord of Holiness/Nazarene social compassion was cut or severed. For the church, evangelism became proclamation only, apart from social compassion.

Raser then speaks of the ways the church has "beat back" the amnesia that characterized her for so many decades. One powerful influence in overcoming the church's amnesia was Timothy Smith's Revivalism and Social Reform and the first volume of our official history, Called Unto Holiness. Smith clearly shows that much of social reform in the 19th century was driven in large part by the idea of Christian perfection. He emphasized the importance of "Holiness Social Work" in Nazarene beginnings.

A further factor in overcoming amnesia was the social upheaval in the United States in the 1960's and 1970's. The contrast between the issues of personal piety that were being dealt with by the church and the larger issues by society in general concerning justice, civil rights, etc., became obvious (particularly to our young people). In Raser's view "this is a major part of the renaissance of compassionate ministry in the Church of the Nazarene, a renaissance which has flowered largely since the middle of the 1970's." Helping rescue the church from its amnesia were persons such as Dr. Tom Nees and the Community of Hope he founded, along with certain efforts such the Nazarene Hunger and Disaster Fund and the creation of the office of Compassionate Ministries in 1984. Thus the process of "beating back the amnesia" has begun.

While there is cause for rejoicing over these developments, Raser expresses two major concerns: 1) The tendency to "compartmentalize" compassionate work, to make it an "adjunctive" part of what we do in the church. 2) The need for the "renaissance" of compassion in the church to be informed by a theological foundation that is faithful to the Bible and also to the theological sources of our holiness/Wesleyan movement.

Both the historical overview and the cautions cited by Ingersol and Raser are outstanding contributions to our ecclesiastical self-understanding, and strong aids in holding us to our mission.

Byron Stone's paper, "Subversive Compassion" resounds with a prophetic note which calls for "change" theologically, ecclesiastically, and institutionally if the church is to follow the compassionate Christ into the 21st century. The change that is required is more than surface change — it involves a "movement toward community with those who suffer and the movement toward the liberation of those who suffer.

The theology of the church in North America must be understood and shaped by the perspective of the poor and needy. Until this takes place compassionate ministry will be condescending and inadequate. (Note: The tenuous global economy may bring this about apart from our design, which of course would bring no credit to us.)

The church must invite the poor into the heart of the life of the church so that real participation becomes possible, and leadership roles available. In order to do this, the church must be shaped by the suffering and poverty of the world. Stone makes a striking point: "The church is called to change the world. But the world must first be allowed to change the church. As Gutierrez puts it, 'the Church must allow itself to be inhabited and evangelized by the world.'"

Institutionally, the church must not allow the various models it has used for doing compassionate ministry, i.e., compassionate ministry programs in local churches, or church-based non-profit corporations, etc., to move compassionate ministry to the periphery of the church. These models must move us toward becoming a truly compassionate church, and not toward a church that practices "remote" control "compassion".

Stone rightly cautions against the church adopting a "corporate" mindset which easily distances the church from the poor and from the servant model of leadership seen in Jesus. Where this occurs executives replace ministers; believers are managed instead of disciplined; evangelism is replaced with marketing. Perhaps one reason we have not attacked the powers that be is because we have adopted the ways the powers do business.

Stone's call for "subversive compassion" as it relates to our theology, our church life, and our institutional forms and programs is incisive and worthy of careful thought and sincere prayer.

Henry Spaulding, our last presenter, has given us important first steps in moving "toward a theology of compassion." He observes that 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.... The church is the community called into being by the Spirit 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."

Our understanding of compassion does not derive from a secular rationalism but from the community of the church, from its "habits and practices." Since theological reflection begins with the worship of a Triune God, a theology of compassion involves worship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christian compassion does not arise out of a sense of duty, but out of true worship.

Further, according to Spaulding, compassion finds its embodiment in a commitment to truthfulness. "The key to compassion is to be found in a character formed by the truth." "We are given in the church God's way of forming us in the truth." The Scripture is God's narrative to bring us to the truth. The sacramental life of the church sustains in us the spirit of genuine compassion. Through the church we become truly human and desire to minister to our fellow human beings.

Compassion finds its motivation and enabling in sanctification, which includes (according to Moltmann) "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'." Thus the emphasis on holiness is imperative for both understanding and fulfilling Christ's mission of compassion.

Spaulding's final word is powerful: "Compassion is not about pointing to proofs, or building carefully crafted arguments based on rationality, nor is it 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."

Several key ideas emerge from these presentations: 1) Deeds of mercy and compassion are a part of the gospel itself — not isolated, or separated from the proclamation of the church. 2) Fulfilling the great commission includes ministry to the destitute, the poor, and the needy. 3) Entire sanctification and holy living are indispensable as empowerment to be compassionate and to do compassion. 4) However, if Wesley is correct, performing deeds of compassion is not automatic, but voluntary. This means that acts of compassion are not viewed as "duties", but spring from the life of Christ within us. 5) Compassionate ministry is a "means of grace", enriching the one who ministers, as well as serving the one being ministered. 6) The Church has not succeeded in confronting the systemic evils and injustices of our world.

Thank you!