

Why We Do What We Do

Hope for a Hurting World

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I was shocked by the question. It came from a visitor who some years ago had stopped by the Community of Hope to see our inner city Washington, DC compassionate ministry program. After giving him a brief description of a variety of neighborhood services we provided such as health care, legal aid, emergency housing, tutoring and job training he asked a question he thought that I as a minister would understand and be able to answer. "Why feed people who are going to hell?" I took it as a rhetorical question. The simple answer he wanted to hear from me was "You don't".

I don't remember my answer or the conversation which followed, but I'll never forget the question. I dismissed him for being too insensitive to be taken seriously. For awhile afterwards when talking about the discussion I repeated his question as a joke. I've come to realize that in a crude way his opinion was the logical outcome of a flawed theology which continues to surface in the continuing discussion of whether compassionate ministries is an end in itself or a means to an end. Put another way, is compassionate ministry an essential part of the gospel or simply a humanitarian gesture which may in fact deflect attention from the primary mission of the church?

If I could I would call a halt to this tired and outdated debate. The recent increase in social Christianity which we now call compassionate ministry is evidence enough that many if not most evangelicals have moved beyond the "social Gospel" stigma. But the questions remain.

I have found that some compassionate ministry practitioners—committed Christians themselves—are so revolted by manipulative evangelism that they refuse to use the “E” word.¹ Other so-called “evangelists” are convinced that only proclamation, if not confrontational persuasion, is evangelism. In their minds, unless offered as a reward for Christian commitment, compassionate ministry is useless.

This confusing and counterproductive debate has been going on among evangelicals throughout most of the 20th century. Too long! Their commitment to the social dimensions of the Gospel fell into disrepute as fundamentalism rose to prominence around 1925². The Church of the Nazarene with its rich history of social Christianity in its formative period (1895-1925)³ changed almost overnight. A period of retrenchment from its historic Wesleyan-Holiness concern for the welfare of people and society set in. While compassionate ministry activity has begun to increase, the church lacks the kind of theological and Biblical integration of social and personal dimensions of the Gospel which guided the Wesleys and founders of the Holiness movement.

Social Christianity consistent with the Wesleyan tradition in the 18th and 19th centuries began to emerge in the Church of the Nazarene around 1975. In the early '80's the Church of the Nazarene gave this rapid increase of church-sponsored ministry a new name – Nazarene Compassionate Ministries.

Since then Nazarene Compassionate Ministries has become a fixture in Nazarene culture. At the same time, evangelicals—even fundamentalists like Marvin Olasky—have come to understand that the case for Christianity can only be made by those who have something helpful to say to a hurting world.⁴

There are some fine recent theological and Biblical writings that are indications of a more informed understanding of social Christianity or compassionate ministry. And yet confusion continues among church leaders,

even among compassionate ministry practitioners.⁵ The debate continues: is Christian compassion a means to an end or an end itself? How important is compassionate ministry to a church committed to fulfilling the Great Commission mandate?

I was in a meeting recently with leaders of compassionate ministry programs in the United States and Canada. I knew that some of them were reluctant to use the “E” work when describing their ministries. Others viewed their ministries as a means to an end, that is, they serve the needy only when and if those served give some evidence of conversion.

To get directly at the issue dividing them, I said that I knew them well enough to be confident that all of them wanted the needy people they see everyday in their compassionate ministry programs become followers of Jesus. Everyone agreed. Not only did they want that, they had dedicated their lives to the notion that Jesus is the Way. That was their motivation for doing compassionate ministry. They could all exchange remarkable resurrection stories that happened as a result of their ministries.

The problem for them, and I believe for the evangelical church, was not really about the “E” word—evangelism. Even those who do not see compassionate ministries as “evangelism” as it is commonly understood agreed that what they want is to see changed lives. As I looked around the room I noticed a sense of unity. They were not as divided as they thought.

For those who saw compassionate ministry as a means to an end it took a bit longer to make my point. Christian compassion as I understand it as taught by Jesus is described in Luke 6:36: “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.” It is a matter of Christian character and can never be reduced to an activity engaged in by evangelical Christians as “bait for the catch.” If

compassionate ministry is a means to an end then two conclusions follow, both of which deny the Gospel of the Kingdom.

First, to use compassion as bait is to engage in manipulative evangelism and produce what insightful missionaries some time ago labeled as “rice Christians.” People in need can easily be bribed into confession and conformity. They’ll repeat the right words, follow directions and even join up if they are desperate enough.

Biblical evangelism—literally to “good-news” people—is to touch people at the point of their need with the compassion of Jesus and invite them to become followers of Jesus. While Christian compassion leads to action, it is first and foremost being or character that precedes doing. As in Luke 6:36 the command is: “Be compassionate!” Compassion is the nature of God, revealed in Jesus and reflected in His disciples. Compassion is what we are to be. What we do follows as an expression of our faith. Christian compassion can never be reduced to an activity we do only if it produces a desired result, even as desirable as conversion.

The second consequence of doing compassion as a means to an end is just as counterproductive. If there is another way to accomplish the end—produce conversions—they why go to the trouble of doing compassionate ministry?

What if in some remote corner of this hurting world in a never-to-be-developed country it is discovered that non-Christians in great numbers and terrible desperation will respond in amazement to a high tech presentation of the Gospel. What if it is possible to produce unprecedented numbers of conversions without addressing the poverty and hunger issues in the global community? What if rich Christians discover that they neither have to give up any of their own wealth to feed the hungry or work for justice since poor people will accept the

offer of Christianity dressed up in high tech hoping that they too may prosper? Compassionate ministry then becomes unimportant and unnecessary whether hungry people are headed for either heaven or hell.

This isn't to suggest that these conversions are necessarily bogus. During American slavery, African slaves who embraced the gospel came to an authentic faith in spite of rather than because of their Christian oppressors. It is simply that evangelism without compassion is evangelism without the gospel. Likewise, compassion without proclamation of the kingdom of God is limited humanitarianism, something short of life-changing good news.

I don't think that evangelical Christians who say that compassion is a means to an end really mean it. Their actions are better than their theology. What is needed is better theology, a better understanding of the Biblical balance between faith and works. Theologians and preachers need to let it be known that there is no conflict between the personal and social dimensions of the Gospel, Wesleyans—especially Wesleyans—need to step up to the challenge of a hurting world. They need to speak and act hopefully from within their own Biblical historical synthesis of church and society.

I was reminded recently by a management consultant that in corporate America company leaders and personnel need to be reminded everyday why they do what they do. How much more is it necessary for those who minister among the poor to know why they do what they do. There is a simple answer that needs much more attention and articulation than it has received in recent times. We do what we do in responding to needy people because this is what Christian character and commitment requires. Compassion is how the gospel of the kingdom is made known. The Word becomes flesh again and again in deeds of kindness and the struggle for justice.

¹ Steve Sjogren, *Conspiracy of Kindness* (Servant Publications: Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1993) "Christians and non-Christians have one thing in common: They both hate evangelism." P. 49

² Thomas G. Nees, *Compassion Evangelism* (Beacon Hill Press: Kansas City, Missouri, 1996) Contains a brief description of how the holiness social ethic was muted if not denied due to the influence of fundamentalism.

³ Thomas G. Nees, *The Holiness Social Ethic*. (Washington, DC: Wesley Theological Seminary, Unpublished D.Min. thesis, 1975)

⁴ Marvin Olasky, a professor of journalism at The University of Texas and a friend of the Christian and political right has made a name for himself as a historian of sorts of American social Christianity. In *The Tragedy of American Compassion, with a preface by Charles Murray*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1992), his fundamentalist theology and at times mean-spirited social response is nevertheless a call for churches to respond to the human needs government programs have failed to redress. In *Renewing American Compassion: How compassion for the needy can turn ordinary citizens into heroes*, (New York: The Free Press, 1996), Olasky offers a practical how-to public service guide with testimonials from volunteers with church-based programs.

⁵ *Compassionate Ministry*, Gary L. Sapp, ed., (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1993), Bryon P Stone, *Compassionate Ministry: Theological Foundations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), Ronald J. Sider, *One-Sided Christianity? Uniting the Church to Heal a Lost and Broken World* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1993)