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Compassion Discussion
Paper
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Compassion Discussion Paper

The authors ask, “How do we know that God is our God and not a stranger, an outsider, a passerby?” Discuss.

The author expresses that we will know that God is not a stranger, outsider or passerby when we consider the fact that in Jesus, God has made his compassion towards us visible. Jesus was, “the concrete embodiment of this divine compassion to the world” pg. 16. We are to understand and consider that Jesus’ response to those who were suffering identified the “divine compassion” God has for us that led him to becoming one of us, making Him a God that is not a foreigner who doesn’t know our experience and difficulties but a God that is for us, willing and ready to become like us, acting on His own compassion for us and responding to our needs.

What is the mystery of God’s compassion as it becomes visible in the healing stories of the New Testament?

The mystery of God’s compassion is the way and depth of how He experiences our pains that move Him, through Jesus, to respond to our suffering. We can see this by paying attention to the words and actions of Jesus to show us that His responses to suffering through His miracles in the Gospel are all due to His deep compassion towards us and not simply to show His ability to perform miracles. The author describes this deep compassion as “to be moved with compassion” or “splanchna” in the Greek which we can understand as feelings in the gut. Jesus’ expression of compassion is not a simple feeling of sympathy but is rather a powerful emotion felt and moved as/in the womb of God (Nouwen et al., 16). The author beautifully puts it as the following:

“When Jesus was moved to compassion, the source of all life trampled, the ground of all love burst open, and the abyss of God’s immense, inexhaustible, and unfathomable tenderness revealed itself.” (pg. 17)

In this, we see that as Jesus is moved by the suffering of the people, He experienced their pain alongside them and His only response was

If compassion is not reaching out from on high to those less fortunate, what is it? What is God’s downward pull?

Compassion, according to the authors, is “going directly to those people and places where suffering is most acute and building a home there.” (Nouwen et al., 27) God’s downward pull is not his pity for us to lift us up but to meet us where we’re at, in our circumstances,

hurt and pain in order to heal us. This is an interesting point to look at considering messages, both within the church and from the world, that ask us to pull ourselves out of our circumstances or rescuing others out of their difficulties. Reading this piece almost sounds like God is asking people not to simply escape but allow him to build a home in our circumstances and create a new perspective as he teaches us about His will and what abounding in His love really means. God's compassion towards us through giving us His son Jesus as He did this very thing and came to live among us instead of simply giving us instruction from afar. What can be seen through this is His intent not just for instruction but for relationship.

How does listening to God and discerning God's voice help us?

Listening to and discerning God's voice gives us the opportunity and freedom not to give into our fears and worries. Listening to God is an act of obedience that allows us to feel the embrace of God's love as we focus what He says about us and our futures, leaving anxiety behind and being willing to live in the present.

Once again the authors remind us that obedience is giving attention to what God says. Citing John 4:18 they speak about fear melting away in God's presence. Discuss the role fear plays in our lives and how it can keep us from listening to God's voice.

Fear creates distance and division between us and God as having fear keeps us from his presence. When we choose to live in fear, it is difficult for us to perceive our lives in a positive and healthy way since being away from God's presence will not grant us the peace of enduring our present circumstances and cause us to react instead with apprehension, anxiety and unhappiness. Fear also keeps us from listening to God by allowing our focus to be on our worries and anxiety of what our present circumstances cloud our judgement and perception of these events. When we abide in God's presence, we are able to walk in the full confidence of his love and properly perceive our circumstances with love. One example presented in the book is Jesus asking Peter three times "do you love me" to which Peter replies to Jesus that he does. Jesus then in John 21:18 tells Peter, "when you grow old you will stretch out your hands, and somebody else will put a belt around you and take you where you would rather not go" which Peter does not desire but when the time does come, Peter, because he did not fear, responded to his circumstance in love, seeing Jesus' words and the cross as a sign of victory instead of defeat (Nouwen et al., 44).

"How can we build community" ask the authors. What is the better question they offer, and how do we answer?

The authors present the following as a better question to ask: "where do we see community occurring?" Finding this answer can be found by identifying the community you already have/belong to that may not necessarily be "Christ" centered. The authors present this as "sowing seeds in soil we've already seen." (Nouwen et al., 60)

"People who live together do not necessarily live in community, and those who live alone do not necessarily live without it." Discuss this statement.

This statement points to the fact that proximity to others does not necessarily define whether we are in community or not, whether we are close or distant from them. Community instead is characterized by a “deep sense of being gathered by God,” where we know and trust that we are connected to others through prayer and care (Nouwen et al., 60). One example presented by the authors is that of Francis Xavier, a Spanish missionary, who found solace during his many travels in the assurance that he belonged to a community that supported him through prayer and brotherly care.

What is the value of voluntary displacement in relationship to Christian community?

Voluntary displacement helps us to walk away from the illusion that “everything is ok” or that we “have it all together” and allows us to instead experience our true condition: that we are all sinners in need of grace (Nouwen et al., 64). Such a truth can be difficult to accept and walk through as we live in a world that demands that you present yourself in a particular way in order to be taken seriously or recognized. This often will force us to hide our true pains, masking it with smiles, accomplishments, or status when really it pushes us further to isolation, making us believe that what we feel is not real and that it is not meant to be something that is understood. Voluntary displacement changes that by revealing the brokenness that is felt within the community, a group filled with others who have strived to meet the world's ideals and seeking freedom in knowing that they are not alone.

Explore the illustration of Philippe Petit and share how displacement can create a new togetherness.

The act performed by Philippe Petit showed the artist demonstrating his ability to walk on a steel wire between two towers until he eventually sought to get to a space of safety on the sandy floor. The engagement of the audience went from awe to applause as everyone had realized that Phillip collated an activity that they themselves would be able to do (Nouwen et al., 77). Displacement here creates a sense of new togetherness as it revealed a common ground to stand on, creating a sense of solidarity amongst strangers.

How does the main effect of being different reveal a deeper level of sameness?

The main effect of being different reveals a deeper level of sameness by revealing that what separates us is less important than what unites us. It reminds us that despite our unique abilities, we are all part of the same human family (Nouwen et al., 78).

What differentiates the typical understanding of discipline from the Christian understanding?

Discipline outside of Christianity seeks to identify human efficiency based on rigorous effort and control. Discipline in Christianity is the effort made not to conquer and control our connection or compassion from God but to reveal what has been hidden (Nouwen et al.,

90). In this sense, it is as if God is saying that the compassion, freedom and direction you seek is inside you but a certain level of awareness must be achieved to realize that it is there in order to act. God's voice is always speaking but it is through discipline that we are able to become and remain sensitive to His voice and presence in our lives.

Why is discipline indispensable to the compassionate life?

Discipline ensures that the lives we lead in Christ remains connected to God especially when other facets of life seek our attention. Discipline, therefore, solidifies that we are guided towards a compassionate way of life that reveals the fruit of God's grace in our life (Nouwen et al., 91).

Share your thoughts about prayer as entering "into a deep, inner solidarity with all human beings so that in and through us they can be touched by the healing power of God's spirit.

Prayer is meant to bring us closer to others and is described as the first expression of human solidarity (Nouwen et al., 108). We're brought together in community through the Holy Spirit, channeling a line of intimacy in which God is able to reveal himself to us. As we continue to grow in our intimacy with God through the Holy Spirit, it deepens our sense of responsibility for others (Nouwen et al., 108). When we pray for others, we "make them part of ourselves (Nouwen et al., 108)," embracing all things that have caused them strife and discord. This makes us become like them, embodying their hurt and bringing it before God so He may move and heal on behalf of His will.

What, do the authors say, is the best criterion for determining whether our confrontation is compassionate and righteous, rather than offensive and unrighteous?

According to the authors, the best criterion for determining whether our confrontation is compassionate and righteous and not offensive and unrighteous is asking ourselves if we can be confronted (Nouwen et al., 125). In other words, the capability of having confrontation directed to us for examination of our own motives must be considered. Too often when we seek to resolve conflict, we find it easier to point out the faults, the wrong and shame that has been brought on by the perpetrator when we ourselves do not or have not set those same standards against offense on ourselves. It's unfair and selfish to think that others can do so much wrong that we fail to consider whether we have done the same. In our aim to correct and resolve issues in a righteous way, our compassion is shown when we can look at ourselves and see that we too may need correction in our lives and seek to aid others in their path towards healing rather than leave them alone in shame for their participation or shame.

Bibliography

Nouwen, H. J. M., Mcneill, D. P., & Morrison, D. A. (2006). *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (Revised ed.). Image.