

A Reaction to “Christian Compassion through the Centuries”

Dr. Glen L. Thompson

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I recall the first time I visited a church member at Salt Lake Regional Medical Center. The name of the facility suggested nothing religious, so I was surprised to see, prominently located right next to the main entrance, a chapel with a cross on the peak of the roof. I came to learn that Salt Lake Regional had originally been Holy Cross Hospital, one of the few Roman Catholic hospitals in Utah. Later, I would hear stories from church members about going there many years before to visit relatives and seeing nuns in full habits walking the halls.

Countless other hospitals, now incorporated into healthcare conglomerates, share similar histories of being founded by Christians. Each one is a reminder of something Dr. Thompson demonstrates numerous times in his essay, which covers over a millennium and a half of history: for centuries, Christians have banded together to serve their neighbors with compassion. Christian ministries of compassion—though the names of many still in existence no longer reflect their Christian origin—have shaped the Western world in ways we may not even realize. Such Christian efforts have made a mark on this nation, even where that may not be immediately apparent, as Dr. Thompson writes: “It would be natural to conclude that many of the American charities that had no formal religious affiliation were still using Christian charity as a model for their work, and the Judeo-Christian background of society in general helped form the consciousness even of those who outwardly denied the faith” (17).

Additionally, of course, there have been innumerable historical examples of individual Christians showing love to those in need. “For every famous example of Christian charity, every Mother Teresa, there are 10,000 unknown men, and probably twice as many Christian women, who have selflessly, humbly, and quietly shown the love of Christ in their lives” (25). At the close his essay, Dr. Thompson’s personal and poignant example of such love demonstrates the grace of Christ in action. For the wealth of historical insight on Christian compassion ministry, we are in his debt.

We thank him also for the clarifying effect his essay can have on our perspective. I confess that at times I have projected my own viewpoints onto Christians of the past. It can happen innocently enough: “I share x belief with Christians of former ages. I also believe y , and so I’m sure that Christians long ago must have believed y too.” This is sometimes true; there are beliefs, opinions, and outlooks that we now hold that are similar or identical to those held in past eras of Christian history. But it’s not necessarily true that because we Christians look at things in a particular way that Christians long ago looked at things in the same way. We may be making assumptions about what they believed and practiced with respect to compassion ministry—assumptions that are neither warranted nor factual.

One of the valuable contributions made, then, by a historical study such as “Christian Compassion through the Centuries” is a more accurate picture of historical Christian beliefs about compassion ministry. Equipped by Dr. Thompson’s research, we can compare past outlooks with our own. As we do so, we may find that we were right all along and that those in the past held views like ours. Then again, we may be surprised to learn that not all Christians at every time and place—even those whose creeds and confessions we hold dear—saw compassion ministry in the way we see it now.

Below I have combined the two parts of my assignment, to react to the essay and to offer some questions to generate further discussion. Please allow me to highlight a few places in Dr. Thompson’s essay that surface Christian views of compassion ministry that may differ from ours today. I say “may” so as not to paint with too broad a brush and claim to speak for all of us. Yet the following points caught my attention and may suggest questions that will produce further discussion.

The first deals with how early Christians thought of the *telos* of compassion ministry:

Interestingly, Christians seemed to see charity as such an integral part of their Christian life, such a natural fruit, that they did not overtly recognize it as an “outreach tool.” No one denied that charity might produce such fruit, but neither did they dwell upon it. As a result, there also seemed to be little if any concern that charity might be viewed as a competitor to the preaching of the Word or administration of the sacraments (4).

1. *Compare and contrast this with current views of compassion ministry.*
2. *Have you ever observed an attitude of what Ken Cherney has called “evangelistic reductionism,” the view that “telling people about Christ is the only worthwhile way to spend one’s life here on earth”? If so, what effect has this had on compassion ministry?*
3. *Should we, in regular preaching and teaching, do more to encourage Christians to show love to their unchurched neighbors simply for the sake of showing love to their unchurched neighbors—not for the purposes of pre-evangelism? Why or why not?*

Dr. Thompson has brought to our attention Sigrun Kahl’s article, which argues that the religious background of European nations has influenced their social programs. In concluding the section about historically Lutheran countries, he writes this:

Sweden, Norway and Finland all followed at various paces, until by the mid-twentieth century these Lutheran areas, all with Lutheran state churches, had the world’s most extensive social programs. The vast majority of care for the poor, sick, and elderly was now paid for by the government via tax revenue (13).

4. *First, do you agree with Kahl's argument that the religious history of European nations has influenced those nations' approaches to social programs? Why or why not?*
5. *Some confessional Lutherans are generally opposed to "extensive social programs" operated by government agencies. In your experience, what are the reasons they cite for such opposition?*
6. *Considering Kahl's study, could such opposition to socialized medicine be more a product of being American than of being Lutheran? What leads you to answer that question as you do?*

The Second Great Awakening in America produced numerous cultural shifts, including an emphasis on individual faith over against beliefs held by a larger body of Christians. Dr. Thompson writes of a corresponding shift in how many regarded compassion ministry:

And just as individuals declared themselves to be pastors, often without training but with the sole qualification that they were moved to do so by the direct call of the Spirit, so many Christians felt the direct call to charity without working through a denominational group, making individual compassion and benefaction more prominent in America than elsewhere (17).

7. *Do you consider this shift to be a net positive or negative for the Church in America, and why do you answer the way you do?*
8. *What effects has such a move (i.e., toward individual over corporate Christian charity) had on groups of Christians conducting compassion ministries?*

Numerous other points could be highlighted and discussed. Dr. Thompson's excellent historical survey has enabled us to look back at Christians' efforts to show compassion to one another and the world, and in doing so to examine and evaluate our own posture toward the same. For this service, we offer Dr. Thompson our heartfelt thanks.

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