

See How They Love One Another!
The Ministry of Compassion in Scripture and Early Christianity to 300 AD
by Dr. Keith Wessel

A reaction by Paul O. Wendland

“All you need is love” the Beatles sang to my Boomer generation. And many of us believed them. The tragic consequences of this belief are plain for all to see. They are a grievous testimony to the insidious power of the lie, because love unformed by truth ends up an empty word that the devil can shape into a thousand self-serving deceptions. Only when shaped by the God who reveals himself as love, and the Man who came down as truth does it become in our hearts that most beautiful of fruits: self-giving, self-forgetful AGAPE, that wants only its neighbor’s good.

Dr. Wessel’s essay makes these things as clear as can be. First, a few general superlatives: I was blown away by the breadth and depth of scholarship evinced in this paper. It was clear that you, Keith, had done extensive reading and were a master of the complexities in all their details. I found your writing engaging and lucid. One had a sense of a case being built up brick by brick until it stood clear and strong before him. I found the summation at the end to be particularly well done and most effective.

Next a few “hot takes”:

1. From the very beginning, you located the source of generosity in the generous heart of God. In the very act of creation, God shows himself to be by nature a Giver, without any “itch he had to scratch.” This was a theme you followed consistently throughout. The love you spoke of was always sourced in that primary love which is “unforced, unasked, unearned.”
2. Without making the Old Testament Scripture into a legal straitjacket, you showed how the Mosaic legislation revealed the heart of a God who remembered the poor, the slave, the vulnerable, and the nobodies of society, “because our faithful God in his mercy made [us nobodies] into a great nation.”
3. You set the voice of the prophets into its proper setting as the nations of Israel and Judah were being transformed by monarchy—and as greater inequities between the rich and the poor followed. True faith (and this love) was corrupted by a false sense of security on the part of the elites: “Of course God loves me! Hasn’t he favored me with wealth?! And isn’t his Temple among us?!”
4. You noted the linguistic and conceptual shifts in the intertestamental period, as the emphasis began to focus more on the benefits of giving as they were accrued by the giver rather than the receiver. It’s a short path from there, as your history shows, into works-righteousness.
5. You presented Jesus, the incarnation of God’s compassion in a way that refreshed us with the power of his one-of-a-kind mercy. A Messiah dying for the ungodly and the worst of sinners, for sheer love.

6. Against the backdrop of early Jewish charities and Greco-Roman euergetism, you helped us appreciate the uniqueness of Christian compassion as a response to Jesus' love. It was odd—and attractive to outsiders in its oddity. “See how they love one another!”
7. As someone who teaches the relevant chapters in the book of Acts, I appreciated your deeply scholarly discussion of the early church's charitable efforts. Especially illuminating to me was your exposition of Tabitha's efforts. You transformed her in my estimation from a widow who did some odd job sewing for other widows into a generous supplier of necessities to the destitute.
8. I believe Paul's practice of using common cultural vocabulary and conceptions to teach Christian ideas is also worthy of special note. I am referring to Thompson's statement, “Paul used familiar benefactor terminology to express some concepts and as a contrast to other new ideas...[formulating] a distinctively Christian vocabulary of giving” (21).
9. As to the issue of whether there were “intentional” ministries of compassion to others in the earliest Christian centuries, your assessment of all the available evidence is sober and compelling. That Christians showed love for each other is unquestionable and was, in fact, “their primary witness to the world” (23). There is at least some evidence of compassion directed towards unbelievers as well, especially during the pandemics of the 2nd and 3rd centuries.
10. But perhaps the most significant point to be made about the earliest church's love was simply its organic nature. It was content to work anonymously and under harsh conditions. From the seed of the gospel, it grew—freely and naturally—seeing the need and responding to it. As you put it so well in your conclusion, “Their sincere love didn't need to be asked, didn't need to analyze and develop a plan; it just *did*.”

Before asking a couple of follow-up questions, I'd like to close this section by expressing my gratitude to you. You have put solid flesh on the bones of insubstantial intuitions we may have regarding the theology and practice of compassion ministry. You are careful to note what can be said, as well as what cannot be said. I know those here have been greatly helped by your efforts. Thank you, Keith. This is really a most impressive work. More than that, it was a mitzvah: a labor of (faith-born) love!

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Questions of the essayist:

1. The decision by the apostles to choose “diakonoi” to respond to the needs of Greek speaking widows demonstrates both intentionality and organization. How do you assess the importance and/or significance of this narrative on the centuries that followed in terms of organization and intentionality?
2. What are we to make—hermeneutically—out of the prominent examples of compassion ministry in Luke's portrayal of the early church? Granted, we are not to make prescriptions out of descriptions, but to what extent do you believe the earliest church saw these descriptions of love for one's neighbor as examples for emulation?