

# Compassion Statement

## Our Position

### *Compassion Ministries Rationale*

#### **Biblical Overview**

Human dignity and worth were established at creation when God made humankind in his own image (Gen 1:26-28). Out of respect for the Creator, Christians value all persons and are predisposed to seek their welfare. This is consistent with the record of Scripture in both Old and New Testaments.

The first gospel promise, that the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15) establishes God's intent to maintain his rule throughout the earth. God told Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him (Gen 12:3, 18:18, 22:18). Throughout the Old Testament, the nations surrounding Israel were indeed blessed to the extent that Israel functioned as a holy kingdom of priests (Ex 19:5, 6). Within Israel, extraordinary provision was made for social justice and the protection of the vulnerable including widows, the poor and aliens. The wisdom books celebrated the virtues of those who cared for the poor and needy (e.g. Pr 19:17, 22:9, 16, 22). The prophets thundered against those who broke covenant through neglect or violation of social responsibility.

Jesus' ministry was consistently marked by concern for the poor (e.g., Mt 11:5, Lk 4:18-19). A rich man who wanted eternal life was told, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." The disciples' response to the anointing of Jesus by the woman at Bethany was that the perfume might have been sold and the money given to the poor (Mt 26:9). This response would lose meaning if it is not understood that Jesus regularly gave to the poor.<sup>1</sup> Since Jesus' disciples gave frequently to the poor, some thought that when Judas left the last supper early, it was for that purpose (In 13:29).

The Gospels highlight Jesus' compassion primarily in the context of the proclamation of the Gospel. It is this same spirit that is implied by the fourth pillar, *Touching*. Jesus' saw the crowds as "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Mt 9:36). His response was to instruct the disciples to pray the Lord of the harvest to send forth laborers (Mt 9:38) and then to send those same disciples on a tour to preach, heal and drive out demons (Mt 10:1-8). Today, those who are moved with compassion as Jesus was still believe his mission is to preach, heal and drive out demons. The proclamation of the Good News still goes with spiritually and physically touching the harassed and helpless.

In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus quotes from Isaiah 61:1-2 as a proclamation of Jubilee (ref. Lev 25:855). "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of

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<sup>1</sup> The same incident demonstrates that loving gifts are never wasted (v. 10), that poverty will never be abolished (v. 11) and that the Gospel will go into all the world (v. 13).

sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." We understand the primary application of these words to be spiritual both within Jesus' ministry and within the ministry of the church. Based upon this primary application, other forms of liberation naturally follow. Note the following:

1. Jesus was anointed to preach the good news. In Acts and the epistles, the church understood preaching to be the proclamation of the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection (Ac 5:42; 10:42; 14:15; 16:6, 10; 17:3; Rom 1:15; 10:8, 15; 15:20; 1 Co 1:17,23; 9:16; 2 Co 2:12; 4:5; 10:16; Gal 1:8, 9,16; Eph 3:8; Co 1:28; 2 Ti 4:2). We believe that compassion ministries should follow the example of Jesus in emphasizing the proclamation of the gospel.
2. Jesus was anointed to preach to the poor. Attention to the poor was a mark of Christ's ministry and should remain a mark of those who are Christ's followers. The preaching of salvation is to be to all. "The poor" are mentioned not to the exclusion of all others, but in the same sense that Acts 2:38 mentioned baptism "in the name of Jesus" (i.e. "on the authority of Jesus"). Neither phrase is exclusive, but both highlight the notable addition to common expectation or precedent. That the poor heard the gospel is remarkable when it might have been expected that only the rich would have this privilege. We believe that ministry to the poor remains a hallmark of those belonging to Christ.
3. Jesus announced freedom for the prisoners and release for the oppressed. Within Luke, this is primarily a spiritual matter. Jesus allowed Herod to imprison his own cousin, John the Baptist (Lk 3:20), and later to kill him. While Jesus called the spiritual leaders to account, there is no record that he attacked the enormous social evil of slavery within the Roman Empire. We encourage touching without attacking, and we believe the Holy Spirit will faithfully bring release--both spiritual and temporal.
4. Jesus brought recovery of sight. Within Luke, blindness is used metaphorically of spiritual blindness (6:39) and of Jesus' healing the blind (Lk 7:21, 22, 18:35-43). Compassionate ministries still reach out to the spiritually blind with salvation. We further believe in both spiritual gifts of healing and in Spirit-filled medical professionals using their training to minister health in Jesus' Name.

Another reference often used in compassionate ministries is Matthew 25:31-46, the parable of the judgment of the sheep and the goats. While some have made these verses central to compassionate ministries, some words of caution are in order. It is notable that the King says to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." *f...*

1. To take this as feeding the poor in general at all times and all places seems at variance with the example of both Jesus and the first-century church. Jesus is only recorded to have fed the multitudes twice, in both cases multitudes that had stayed a long time to hear him preach. The early church is not known to have fed the public, though they did feed church widows and sent offerings for the famine relief of the church. Both Jesus and the church would have regularly given to the poor, but this does not seem to be the focus of Matthew 25.
2. In the light of surrounding scripture, "the least of these brothers of mine" (v. 40) is best taken to mean the disciples or other believers, especially those who are impoverished

as a result of their sharing in Christ's mission of preaching the Gospel.<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:19 uses the same word (Greek, *elachiston*) of the "least in the kingdom of heaven." Paul uses the same word in 1 Corinthians 15:9, "I am the least of the apostles." Matthew 11:11 uses a synonym (Greek, *micron*) of the "least in the kingdom of God." Luke 12:32 says, "Do not be afraid, little (*micron*) flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." These passages point to the least ones of Matthew 25:40, 45 as being believers. Further, the fact that all three synoptic gospels, Matthew 12:48-50, Mark 3:35 and Luke 8:19-21 show that Jesus identified his followers as his brothers means that this truth is important. In addition, Matthew 10:37-42 uses similar vocabulary within the context of feeding those who are in need because they preach the gospel. "He who receives you receives me . . . And if anyone gives even a cup of water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward" (v. 40,42).

3. Compassionate ministries should encourage local believers throughout the world to take care of the physical needs of believers on a local level, especially those who may be impoverished as a result of the testimony they have borne for Christ. This concept is supported by the following scriptures: In Acts 6, the local church chose seven men to look over the distribution of food. Paul's writing to Timothy demonstrated the common practice of feeding widows, though Paul limited those for whom the church was responsible to a select class of godly, older widows (1 Ti 5:9-10). James refers to the care of widows and orphans together with keeping unspotted from the world as being the essence of true religion (Jas 1 :27). While John praises Gaius for showing hospitality to those traveling "for the sake of the Name," he strongly condemns Diotrophes for refusing to allow the church in his location to practice the same hospitality (3 Jn 5-10).
4. Of course, compassionate ministries may also minister to the poor in general as the Holy Spirit guides and enables.

## **Compassion and Eschatology**

The Assemblies of God believe in a literal rapture, tribulation, millennium and final state. We engage in missions with the understanding that the world's systems as we know them are growing old and will perish. While we work for justice and social uplift, we do so from the perspective that Christ's presence within a life or society will bring uplift and that Christ's coming will usher in a new order in which righteousness will be the order of the day. Thus, we approach compassionate issues from a different perspective than those who are amillennial, postmillennial or preterist in their interpretation. These positions tend to feel that the future kingdom of God is reached in a straight line from the present order, and thus the mission of the church is to transform society as movement toward the final eternal kingdom. We believe that by emphasizing the return of Christ and the judgment of this present order, we will in fact bring greater and more eternal transformation than if we maintained a more narrow

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<sup>2</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IV? Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 118. R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: an Introduction and Commentary*, in *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, gen. ed. Leon Morris (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 1985),357. D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, vol. 8 in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984),519-520. Stanley Horton, *Matthew in The Complete Biblical Library: The New Testament Study Bible*, ed. Stanley Horton (Springfield: World Library Press, Inc., 1989),561.

focus upon transforming the present order. Our compassionate and transformational ministries are always undertaken in view of the soon return of Jesus Christ.

### **Reasons to Engage in a Program Meeting Social Need**

We engage in meeting needs for many reasons including the following:

1. The entire Bible, the ministry of Christ and the life of the first-century church would all lead to a strong sense of concern and compassion. While it would be anachronistic to attempt to put present organizational models into the first century, we strive for models that demonstrate the core values of spiritual power and physical concern demonstrated by Christ and the apostolic church. Acts 10:38 states that Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit and power and "went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him." Our desire is to be and do no less.
2. Christians care! Christian character mandates concern for the needs of our neighbors, whoever they may be. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, there is an example of Christ's blessing upon a compassionate act following the tragedy of undeserved human suffering. Jesus taught, "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:44).
3. Christians want their character to recommend Jesus to others. Jesus taught that our good deeds should be seen in such a way that they cause others to glorify God (Mt 5:16).
4. Christians believe in being good stewards of all of life in keeping with such verses as 1 Corinthians 4:2, "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" and 1 Peter 4: 10, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms." This concept is also taught in the parable of the talents (Mt 25: 14-30, also note Lk 19:12-27). Those with material blessings, specialized skills or professional training naturally want to use their talents for the glory of Christ.
5. Compassionate ministry opens doors for other forms of Christian witness. While scrupulously avoiding being manipulative or insensitive, we should be quick to recognize the open doors the Holy Spirit prepares for witness. We believe that sensitive Pentecostal Christians may be greatly used by God as they avoid misusing compassion on the one hand and ignoring the open doors it brings on the other. Often, compassionate outreach is among the limited number of legitimate means to live and serve among those needing Christ.