



THE MESSAGE BOARD
A Newsletter from
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Personal Reflections

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Amsterdam 400: Celebrating 400 Years of Baptist Life and Witness

Part 2

Recently, Baptist delegates from around the world gathered in Amsterdam to celebrate the founding the first Baptist congregation by English dissenters who had fled England. Led by John Smythe and Thomas Helwys, they were welcomed and sheltered by the Mennonite community in Amsterdam. What follows are thoughts generated by the day's presentations.

Day 2: Focus on Mission

Mission was the theme of our second evening of worship and reflection on Baptist life. Raquel Contreras, who serves as the General Secretary of the Union of Evangelical Baptist Churches of Chile, was the preacher.

"The church is where we practice Jesus' character," Rev. Contreras began. Compassion is at the heart of his character. "We are to live compassion."

The significant debates about health care reform and immigration policy reform will undoubtedly stretch us, as the church in the U.S., to further discover what it means to "practice Jesus' character" and "to live compassion."

Several months ago I had a conversation with a particular ecumenical colleague that shook me. As we were discussing the upcoming health care debate, he told me about his visit with a wealthy, conservative, evangelical family who were donors to his ministry. Their conversation turned to health care. As the couple defended a rather restrictive health care policy based on the ability to pay, my friend countered with a sincere query, "Just what do we do about all the poor and uninsured?" This Christian woman's quick reply was something like, "Well, they just die, don't they?"

I asked my friend, "Where in the world was the compassion of Christ in her thinking? How could all those years of hearing the gospel and the prophets not have created a concern for the poor?" "I don't know," was his reply, "and I am sure that while she would be very quick to condemn scientific Darwinism, she has de facto embraced social Darwinism—the survival of the fittest." And of course in this conversation "the fittest" correlated to economic status and wealth.

I believe that for us as disciples of Jesus, the calculus of reform in these two critical public debates must include the calculus of compassion if we are to practice Jesus' character. Just as I do not want my health insurance corporation's financial bottom line to be the only determinant in my health care—will I make a profit for them?—neither do I want economics to be the only determinant in our society's care for "the least of these." To allow the most vulnerable in our society—the children and the elderly who are poor, as well as the unemployed and underemployed—to struggle with inadequate medical care and its consequences does not square with the voice of the prophets nor with the practice of Jesus' character. It does square nicely, though, with social Darwinism.

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Amsterdam 400: Celebrating 400 Years of Baptist Life and Witness—Part 2 (continued)

Universal access to health care seems to be not only compassionate, but also wise. Preventative measures, counseling on better nutrition and health habits for all of us, and timely medical intervention have all been shown to lower the overall costs to society by producing better health.

Concern for the public's health and the first hospitals came from the church as an expression of Jesus' compassion, mercy and love for all. For the church to be genuinely counter-cultural today as a missional community that lives as a colony of the kingdom in the midst of the world, the practice of compassion and Jesus' character must mark us and must invigorate our voices to speak for the importance of the calculus of compassion in public policy.

American Baptist historian, William Brackney, in a powerful address to the Baptist World Alliance General Council following the Amsterdam 400 celebration, detailed how we Baptists throughout our history have been social transformers. From our beginnings with the choice of the first Baptists to settle among the poor in the Spittlefields area of London, we have been marked by a passion and compassion for "the least of these" and have drawn much of our membership from their ranks. Our voices have been raised against slavery, the oppression of women, the exploitation of children and discrimination. We have done so because we have known that this is essential to "practicing Jesus' character" and to "living compassion."

There is an innate wisdom in compassion. It binds us to the other in ways that open us to a richer form of community. The early church gave evidence of this richer life as it alone in Roman society accepted responsibility for the care of the poor and the burial of the indigent. As a direct consequence of its "living compassion" as an expression of Jesus' character, the early Christian church grew. People were drawn to a community where love and compassion bound one not only to relative and friend, but to stranger as well.

"Living compassion" was a critical mission strategy for the early church. It is no less so today. This generation of skeptics about the church, and therefore the gospel, has its antennae finely attuned to perceived hypocrisy by the church. They hear us speak of love as the core attribute of God and of his community of followers. They expect to see us "living compassion."

The church experienced as "lived compassion" for the downcast and the outcast, for the dejected and the rejected, for our communities and the world, is one of the most important forms of mission today.



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