

A House of Compassion

Shepherding God's Flock

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The year is 1559. John Calvin receives a letter. It comes from a minister in northern Holland, Menso Poppius. He is asking Calvin for advice in several cases of discipline. After the Reformation began, church discipline was a pressing topic for many church leaders. Prior to the Reformation, discipline had become a system of payments and penalties, a money-making business for the church, and in effect hollowing out the reality of true repentance. In (over)reaction to this, the Anabaptists, were pursuing a pure church through rigorous discipline. One failure and you're out!

You can understand Rev. Poppius's questions. Calvin answered him by giving advice in the various situations, but then at the end of his letter he makes a remark you might not expect from him. As you exercise discipline, Calvin says, make sure that strictness does not gain the upper hand over compassion. Isn't that an amazing comment? Calvin certainly saw the need for church discipline, but also insisted that it should be directed and motivated by compassion.

COMPASSION AT THE HEART OF THE CHURCH

This is a lesson not just for the church in the time of the Reformation, but for all times. Paul writes to the Thessalonians *"And we urge you brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all"* (1 Thessalonians 5:14). And the apostle Peter, after he has given instructions to the elders, writes *"Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another"* (1 Peter 5:5).

In this article, I ask your attention to the connection between the church and compassion. This connection has a deep and amazing basis. Isn't the church the result and evidence of God's compassion with sinners? In the church we receive the wonders of God's compassion in Christ through the gospel. Compassion is at the very foundation of who we are and what we do as congregations. The Lord also wants to use his churches as beacons of compassion in this world. God's people have to reflect the compassion of the Lord. But that begs the question: are we? Is compassion indeed a word people would use when describing the life and actions of the church?

BEARING BURDENS, NOT JUDGING FAILURES

Since compassion is at the foundation of who we are as churches, it must be proclaimed in the preaching, promoted by the ministry of mercy and practised by all in the communion of saints. It is a defining element in the shepherding of the church, and thus also in the exercise of discipline. Without excluding the other elements, I will focus on the exercise of church discipline. And keep in mind that discipline is not only what elders exercise, but also what we are called to do toward one another, mutual discipline. We all know how important discipline is. But, in light of what Calvin said, is it always governed by compassion?

Professor Helenius de Cock (son of Hendrikus de Cock) once remarked that discipline is one of the loveliest institutions given by Christ to the church. It breathes nothing but love. However, de Cock adds that discipline is also an institution in which little love is often found and exercised.

Isn't this what we all learn from Galatians 6:1-2? Bear one another's burdens. What are these burdens? Verse 1 gives the answer: it is when we fall into sin. It is a burden that can hinder a child of God to progress in the journey of life. It happens so easily. The image is one of travelling. Imagine that as you travel, you see your fellow traveller fall down under the weight of a burden. What do you do? Point a finger? Serve you right! Gossip? No, you go to the person and help so that he can continue to travel, and you can together reach the end. After all, it can happen

to you too! This is an attitude motivated by the Spirit of Christ.

You should read the commentary of Calvin on this text. It is eye-opening. He warns for unreasonable and excessive severity. Such severity, though under guise of zeal, springs in many instances from pride, and from dislike and contempt of the brethren. Calvin says, we are taught here to correct the faults of brethren in a mild manner, he writes. Our rebukes have to breathe the spirit of meekness and in this way show true Christian character. Calvin's commentary and his letter to Rev. Poppius are saying the same!

Back to Galatians 6, the Spirit says that when we do this we fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2). What is this law? It can refer to the law Christ had to follow and fulfilled, namely giving himself for the salvation of sinners. It can also refer to what he taught. Think in this connection of the rule our Saviour gave in Matthew 18. We are familiar with this rule, the call to mutual discipline. It has a place in our Church Order. But then also note the context in which this rule was given.

Matthew 18 begins with the question of the disciples, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Their concern is being the first to arrive. The Lord Jesus redirects their focus to those who are straggling to come along because of temptations to sin. To drive this point home even more the Lord adds the parable about the lost sheep. Then follows the instruction about mutual discipline. The Lord is saying to his disciples, your focus should not be on who will be first, but on what about those who are in danger of falling away?

Isn't that compassion? And when in your own life you have experienced how destructive sin can be and how liberating it is to confess and be forgiven, wouldn't you want the same for your brother or sister? This is what motivated David to compose Psalm 32. Living in the richest of God's grace, we want to be intentional in building a culture of kindness.

SHEPHERDS WHO REFLECT CHRIST

What applies to the congregation as a whole, surely applies to the men who are called to lead in the church, the office bearers. Building a culture of kindness is a responsibility of us all, but certainly the office bearers have an important task in this regard. Since this is a men's conference I want to take this time to focus on the task of office bearers.

Just reflect on the requirements for office as listed in Scripture. What qualifies a brother for serving? Is it to be well liked and popular? Is it being able to lead a meeting well or to be able to manage a business? Certainly these elements are helpful, but Scripture focuses on different kinds of qualities, spiritual qualities. Just reflect on what we find in 1 Timothy 3, sober-minded, self-controlled, hospitable, gentle, to mention some. These are spiritual attitudes. Doesn't showing and promoting compassion belong to these?

To explore this further let's turn to Ephesians 4:11-14. This passage speaks about the various offices in the church at that time, but they all have one source. Verse 11 starts with "*He gave*". Who is the "*he*"? The risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ. The offices are his gifts to the church he bought with his blood. And why does he give these men? They are the means by which the grace and glory of Christ reaches the lives of God's people. Or as verse 12 says, to equip the saints, to build up the body of Christ. And 16 adds, Christ's purpose is to make "*the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*"

Office bearers are the evidence of God's compassion, and for this reason they have to exhibit and promote it.

TRUTH AND COMPASSION BELONG TOGETHER

This may not always be easy and many office bearers feel the weight of this task. How do you show compassion when working with the rules the church has agreed upon? In this connection we need to be aware of false dilemmas, as if showing compassion is opposed to applying the rules.

We confess that the church must be governed by the spiritual order (Belgic Confession Article 30-32). These rules in themselves are not obstacles to showing or building compassion. On the contrary, they are essential to compassion. They preserve and promote harmony and unity and keep us all in obedience to God (Belgic Confession Article 32). If there were no rules and regulations for the government of the church then the peace Christ has obtained for us is in danger of being replaced by the tyranny of “self”. Think of the refrain in the Book of Judges: Each did what is good in their own eyes. The rules are not a hindrance to building a culture of kindness. It is our attitude in working with them that can be the obstacle.

This Lord makes this very clear in Ezekiel 34. It is a well known chapter when it comes to the offices in the church. The LORD uses an image of the shepherd whose responsibility it is to care for the flock. In this chapter the LORD condemns the shepherds of Israel because they have shown no compassion for his flock. Listen to 34:4 “*The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not brought back, and with force and hardness you have ruled them.*” He takes it very personal that they did this, because he cares for his sheep. He cares so much that he will not tolerate this any longer. He will dismiss these false shepherds and he himself will care for his sheep. 34:11 “*For thus says the LORD God: ‘Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out.*” Doesn’t this tell us something about the care we ought to show in the church? The love of Christ must control us, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:14.

KNOWING THE SHEEP

Returning to Calvin’s letter to Poppius. Strictness should not gain the upper hand over compassion. Calvin mentions this in connection with discipline. We have rules for church discipline, steps to follow. They are very important. They prevent arbitrariness but also aim at repentance. Discipline is meant to restore sinners, to let the compassion of Christ reach the lives of those who are burdened by sin (Galatians 6:2).

For this reason, using these rules may never become an administrative business, filling in the boxes as you fill in your tax papers. We are dealing with a spiritual order, and compassion is evidence of spiritual strength.

In his commentary on Galatians 6, Calvin says that severity can hide itself under the guise of zeal. He may be addressing the Anabaptists’ approach to discipline, but the warning applies to us as well. Let me point to two ways in which we can fail to show compassion. The first is being too easy on sin and the second in being too harsh on the sinner. On the one hand, patience and compassion should not mean that we lessen the demands of God’s holy law. This can happen. We feel sorry for the person, or we don’t want to come across too harsh. The teachings of the Word of God are clear. To ignore or excuse sin is not a sign of compassion at all. In fact it is cruel. On the other hand, we need to be aware that these laws need to be applied pastorally to the members in their concrete situations with the goal of restoration. The closer we are to the people, the better equipped we are to admonish and encourage.

To be able to carry one another’s burdens, you have to go to the person and understand the situation of that person. To be able to do this you have to know your sheep, be acquainted with their needs and the situations in their lives. The sheep do not have to come to the shepherd, but the other way around, following the example of the Great Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who came to us in his compassion.

So, yes we need to be clear in teaching what God teaches in his word, but at the same time have compassion in how we apply these rules.

THE BALANCE FOUND IN CHRIST

How to keep the proper balance? Is a balancing act on a tight rope? No, because of Christ.

Let me explain by referring to the letter Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. We learn from that letter that there were serious problems, even blatant sins in that church. Paul does not shy away from mentioning it and admonitions

them. But he opens the letter by calling them “*church of God, sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.*” He then goes on saying that he gives thanks to God for them because of the grace given them in Christ Jesus. There is the balance: Christ and his grace. Knowing his grace we truly fear his majesty. As we sing in Psalm 130:

“If showing no compassion you would our sins record and mark all our transgressions, who then could stand, O LORD? But you will pardon fully all our iniquity, that we may serve you truly and fear your majesty.”

Church and compassion belong together because of Christ’s grace. Each Lord’s Day, we come to God’s House to be nourished and refreshed by the blessings of God’s compassion, and we leave His House of Compassion with the blessing of the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

This enables us to travel onward, walking humbly with our God, bearing each other’s burdens and so fulfilling the law of Christ.