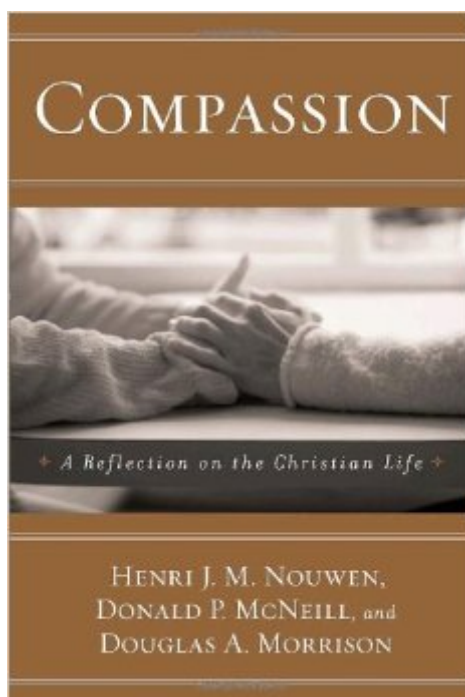


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Compassion: A Reflection On The Christian Life



Synopsis

In this provocative essay on that least understood virtue, compassion, the authors challenge themselves and us with these questions: Where do we place compassion in our lives? Is it enough to live a life in which we hurt one another as little as possible? Is our guiding ideal a life of maximum pleasure and minimum pain? Compassion answers no. After years of study and discussion among themselves, with other religious, and with men and women at the very center of national politics, the authors look at compassion with a vigorous new perspective. They place compassion at the heart of a Christian life in a world governed far too long by principles of power and destructive control. Compassion, no longer merely an eraser of human mistakes, is a force of prayer and action -- the expression of God's love for us and our love for God and one another. Compassion is a book that says no to a compassion of guilt and failure and yes to a compassionate love that pervades our spirit and moves us to action. Henri Nouwen, Donald McNeill, and Douglas Morrison have written a moving document on what it means to be a Christian in a difficult time.

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The not too well known poet Yosano Akiko wrote, "This one thing will I ask you: Are you with the people or apart from them? Depending on your answer, you and I will be forever divided between heaven and earth." This is the heart of Compassion. Nouwen and his co-authors argue that it is only genuine compassion, the ability to go outside of one's self in love for the other, that we find the meaning of God's love in Christ. It speaks directly to the heart of the Gospel, an incarnate faith in a life of compassion. Christ is known in "the least of these," in the person who is next to you now, on

the bus, in the office, at your home. This is one of the books that I would really like to recommend to any Christian, regardless of their interests in theology or spirituality. Centered around the self-emptying, kenotic love of God in Christ, the book reminds us that Christianity is not a dogma, or a rule, or some system, but rather a Person. The authors use St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, 2:6-11, as the scriptural touchstone of the book. "In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus..." Dogmas and theologies are footnotes, Nouwen suggests, to the reality of the crucified and risen Christ as experienced by the disciples and his followers. They are essential, but they are not the "thing" in itself. To come to know the meaning of our lives, our creation, we must enter into the love of God directly through compassion. Anyone in the field of social services would benefit from this book immensely. Sometimes we lose sight of the value and meaning of our lives. This book is an antidote. This insightful work is divided into three parts. 1) The Compassionate God- examining the nature and mission of Christ and what he tells us about the Father.

The book, *Compassion, a Reflection on the Christian Life*, by Henri Nouwen, Donald McNeill, and Douglas Morrison is about the meaning and role of compassion in a Christian's life. The book is a collection of reflections by the three authors and some of their friends, gathered in a series of weekly meetings, as they discussed what compassion means in our society. The book was written many years after these meetings. The book does not mention how the writing was divided among the three authors. The introduction makes it clear that these authors are not talking about simple compassion, as most people understand the concept, but rather, a literal "suffering with" compassion; one that requires us to enter into places of pain, and to share the misery of those who suffer. It is a compassion that is contrary to our natural goals in life; competition for a better life, to be on top, to have distinct identities. To really understand compassion we need to make a radical change of heart and mind, which the authors feel Jesus' meant when he said: "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate." The authors suggest our service to our fellow human being requires radical commitment and self-sacrifice (in my opinion, they are suggesting self-flagellation). Compassion happens in the world when true Christian community is formed. Each member of the community can contribute with their own skill set, according to God's will for each of us, in order to serve a great variety of needs (page 58). In my opinion, the best part of the book was the chapter on prayer. Prayer and action are an essential part of discipleship. Prayer strengthens our discipleship, and allows the Spirit of God to speak freely to us.

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