

Toward A Transformative And Sustainable Practice Of Compassion In Workplaces

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ABSTRACT: Compassion has received much attention in recent organizational scholarship as an important factor for creating an emotionally healthy workplace. This study contributes to the growing literature on organizational compassion by seeing compassion through the lens of Christian biblical theology. The biblical word for compassion is an emotive-action word that always demands holistic involvement of the compassion-giver in response to others' suffering. Moreover, it requires interpersonal commitment and comes at a significant cost to the compassion-giver. Such understanding of compassion can help organizational leaders better appreciate the potential and limits of compassion and nurture truly transformative and sustainable practice of compassion in organizations.

KEYWORDS: Biblical theology, commitment, compassion, empathy, interpersonal relationships, leadership, organizational culture, organizing, Sabbath, sympathy

INTRODUCTION

Compassion first received scholarly attention as an important aspect of organizational life by Frost (1999) in his paper published on the *Journal of Management Inquiry*. While he was staying at a hospital as a cancer patient, Frost saw how compassion transformed those who experienced it. Reflecting on the experience, Frost asserted that the focus on performance and abstract theorization in the conventional organizational research had completely missed the transformative actions that take place in organizations every day. With the assertion, Frost (1999) proposed compassion as a theoretical lens to examine the humanity and aliveness in organizational life. Since then, compassion has received increasing attention from organizational scholars. In her 2012 presidential address for the Academy of Management, Anne Tsui (2013) even made a forceful argument calling her fellow scholars "to conduct research that inspires managers to lead compassionately" (p. 177).

A group of organizational scholars enthusiastically accepted the proposal and began to publish both theoretical and empirical studies with compassion in organizations as the focal point. The last decade has produced a significant amount of research on compassion. For example, a number of studies examine how compassion is practiced in organizations and develop theoretical models of

compassion organizing (Atkins & Parker, 2012; Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006; Grant, 2012; Kanov et al., 2004; Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012; Simpson, Cunha, & Rego, 2015). In 2012, one of the leading journals in organizational scholarship, *Academy of Management Review*, even published a special issue on "Understanding and Creating Caring and Compassionate Organization." In the introductory paper for the special issue, the editors emphatically stated that "compassion is a timely topic" that can potentially generate "radical" outcomes in organizations (Rynes, Bartunek, Dutton, & Margolis, 2012, pp. 503, 518).

The existing studies systematically analyze how compassion is put into action in organizations (e.g., Atkins & Parker, 2012; Dutton et al., 2006; Gittell & Douglass, 2012) as well as the potential impact of compassion on organizational members. For example, some studies found that experiencing compassion can mitigate employees' stress and affect how people see themselves, their colleagues, and their organizations, which in turn, positively affects their job attitudes and behaviors (Lilius et al., 2008). Other studies also highlight various positive outcomes of compassionate acts in organizations such as building their capacity for cooperation and increasing the commitment of their members (Boyatzis, Smith, & Beveridge, 2013; Cameron & Dutton, 2003; Dutton, Lilius, & Kanov, 2007). Because of the tangible benefits

of compassion, there are also studies exploring factors that stimulate or induce compassionate behavior (Jazaieri et al., 2013, 2016).

While the research on compassion in organizations is remarkable and commendable, this study suggests that the research has taken a somewhat overly instrumental view of compassion. There are indeed many benefits of practicing compassion in organizations. However, if compassion is primarily practiced and encouraged with such instrumental benefits in mind, it may no longer be compassion. This study contributes to the growing literature on organizational compassion by seeing compassion through the lens of Christian biblical theology. The prominent Scottish theologian, Thomas F. Torrance (2015) writes that compassion is “one of the most pregnant and profound” words in the Bible (p. 132). It is central to Christianity in that the core Christian theology is founded on the most compassionate act of God in giving his Son for the sins of humanity. The biblical understanding of compassion is deeply interpersonal, and it often entails significant cost to the compassion-giver. Although a collective benefit is often generated from the sacrificial acts of a compassion-giver, compassion is fundamentally about giving without regard to benefits. As such, Christian theology offers a more complex and nuanced understanding of compassion that not only shows what the transformative practice of compassion may look like, but also reveals its costs. Such understanding of compassion can nurture a more sustainable practice of compassion in organizations.

In the following section, this paper offers a brief review of current organizational research on compassion, including its definition, rationale, and effect on organizations. While recognizing the main thrust of research that points to the transformative effect of compassion in organizations, this study also suggests some potential shortcomings in the current research. Then, the study explores the biblical meaning of compassion, particularly as expressed in the New Testament (NT), and its implications. Next, based on the biblical understanding of compassion, the study discusses how compassion can be exercised in organizations more meaningfully and sustainably.

COMPASSION IN CONTEMPORARY ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

Definition and Rationale

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines compassion as “the feeling or emotion, when a person is moved by

the suffering or distress of another, and by the desire to relieve it.” The definition emphasizes the emotional aspect of compassion. Even though compassion is often used to describe an emotion, in practice, true compassion rarely remains just an emotion (Clark, 1997). In fact, the English word compassion comes from a composite Latin word that brings together “*com*” (together) and “*pati*” (to suffer). It means to share in other’s pain or suffering. As such, compassion often moves the person who senses other’s suffering to actions that mitigate the suffering (Miller, Grimes, McMullen, & Vogus, 2012). The current understanding of compassion in organizational literatures reflects this orientation toward action. For example, Tsui (2013) conceptualizes compassion as containing *both “feelings and behaviors”* that are directed toward caring and helping others (p. 168). Dutton et al. (2006) also emphasizes the *practice* of compassion by defining compassion as “an expression of an innate human instinct to respond to the suffering of others” (p. 60).

Most organizational researchers today accept the working definition of Clark (1997) and conceptualize compassion as a three-part process that comprises “noticing another’s suffering, feeling empathy for the other’s pain, and responding to the suffering in some way” (as cited in Frost et al., 2006, p. 846). While compassion is similar to other management concepts such as empathy and emotional intelligence (Caruso & Salovey, 2004; George, 2000; Pavlovich & Krahnke, 2012), the concept of compassion in organizations is unique in that it emphasizes the actions in response to the suffering of others. Empathy and emotional intelligence focus on one’s ability to understand the emotions and feelings transmitted through verbal and nonverbal messages and to use the information to manage social interactions in organizations (Holt & Marques, 2012). The concept of compassion differs from empathy or emotional intelligence in two important ways. First, compassion focuses exclusively on the sufferings and pains that others experience, instead of positive or negative emotions. Second, compassion stresses not just empathy, but also the actions that mitigate the suffering.

Compassion has gained the attention of organizational scholars in recent years because it is regarded as an important remedy for difficult emotional and cultural issues in organizations. Work in a competitive marketplace naturally entails some amount of stress. There are deadlines to meet, pressures to perform, and competition to overcome. Not surprisingly, leaders of organizations are often the instigators of the pressures and emotional stress.

Although not all pressures are necessarily bad, living under constant pressure can emotionally exhaust a person and lead to burnout. According to a study by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (1999), 40% of workers said their job was very or extremely stressful, and 25% of workers saw their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives. Moreover, employees also have life outside of the organization where unexpected miseries happen, which can interact with their experiences at work and exacerbate their stress.

When the leader of an organization ignores the emotional reality and treat the workers without sensitivity, employees can easily become frustrated with the leader and turn bitter. Frost (2004) calls these negative emotional reactions “toxins” that can sap employee motivation and corrode organizational culture. If these toxins are not dealt with effectively, they can become highly “toxic and very dysfunctional to the health and effectiveness of the employees and the organizations.” (Frost, 2004, p. 1). Frost argues that compassion can function as an agent that neutralizes emotional toxins in organizations and creates an emotionally healthy workplace. He challenges organizational researchers to see beyond the surface level interactions in organizations and examine the emotional aspects of organizational life through the lens of compassion. Responding to Frost’s challenge, researchers began to explore the transformative effect of compassion on organizational members who are experiencing hardships.

Transformative Effects of Compassion in Organizations

From our own experiences, many of us know that being a recipient of genuine compassion can be one of the most transformative experiences one can have in organizational life. For example, David Novak (2009), the former Chairman and CEO of Yum Brands, remembers how the compassion extended to him by his boss and co-workers during his family’s excruciating health crisis left an indelible impact on his own development as a leader. Even years later, Novak writes in his autobiography, “the support I got was overwhelming, and I’ve never forgotten it. If anyone on my team today has a family emergency, we just move heaven and earth to help.... I learned early on that health and family have got to come first” (p. 43).

While many understand the transformative effect of such compassionate actions anecdotally, the effect of compassion has not been systematically examined by organizational scholars until recently. Frost’s (1999, 2006) insistence at seeing the organization through the lens of compassion and subsequent theoretical developments have

awakened an interest in studying the effect of compassion among organizational researchers. Recent empirical studies verify and document a number of positive effects of compassion on employees’ emotional health and behavior. For example, one study surveyed 239 hospital employees to see how compassion affected the workers’ commitment level. The study found that the experience of compassion increased employees’ sense of commitment to the organization as well as positive emotions such as feeling proud, grateful, inspired, or at ease (Lilius et al., 2008).

Another recent study investigated the influence of a culture of compassionate love on employees’ emotional health and work attitude in a health-care facility as well as the patients’ health outcomes (Barsade & O’Neill, 2014). The study used a longitudinal design and collected data from 185 workers, 108 patients and 42 family members of patients at two points in time (16 months apart). First, the study found that a compassionate culture at work resulted in higher worker satisfaction and stronger teamwork while reducing worker absenteeism and emotional exhaustion. Astoundingly, employees’ perception of compassion at time 1 was almost always negatively associated with employee withdrawal and positively associated with employee engagement at time 2. In other words, employees who had a more extensive experience of compassion in the organization at time 1 were less likely to leave the organization and more likely to find meaning and satisfaction from work at time 2. Second, the study also found that compassion produced positive health outcomes among patients. Patients who sensed higher level of compassionate love at time 1 reported higher quality of life, greater satisfaction, and fewer trips to the emergency room at time 2. These research findings add to the mounting evidence supporting the transformative effect of compassion in organizations.

Researchers also found that compassion makes an organization and its members more resilient to unexpected challenges. In his autobiography mentioned above, David Novak (2009) suggests that the experience of compassion has given him a stronger emotional foundation and a greater capacity to handle work-related stress. Similarly, research shows that people who have received compassionate care in organizations heal from their pains and stresses much more completely. Because their healing from emotional pain is more complete, when they experience other setbacks in the future, they are more resilient and recover faster (Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius, & Kanov, 2002). Moreover, some studies show that compassion can also enhance employee cooperation and

commitment to each other, which in turn, contributes to their resilience in challenging times (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Dutton, Lilius, & Kanov, 2007; Lilius et al., 2008).

Recognizing the many positive effects of compassion in organizations, some researchers began to examine compassion as an independent behavioral trait that can be induced and developed. For example, an influential neuroscience study investigated compassion or empathy using brain-imaging technology and characterized empathy as a controlled response to compassion-inducing external stimulus (Singer et al., 2004). As a rational-emotional response to the external stimulus involving the misfortunes of others (Snow, 1991), some researchers theorized that compassion can be stimulated and developed. For example, Jazaieri et al. (2016) studied the effect of compassion meditation on caring behavior. The research observed 51 adults who went through nine weeks of a structured compassion meditation program. The study reports that compassion meditation training decreased mind wandering to unpleasant topics and increased caring behaviors.

In sum, recent research findings on compassion in organizations have offered a whole new lens to examine organizations and reveal many tangible benefits from encouraging compassion at workplaces. While recognizing their significance and value, seen from the biblical standpoint on compassion, this study suggests that the current research on compassion in organizations is incomplete, and some research findings may even be misleading. As mentioned above, some studies treat compassion as a behavioral trait that can be isolated and stimulated. These studies objectify compassion and treat it as if it is a property that can be maximized for organizational benefit. However, as other recent studies have suggested (Grant & Patil, 2012; Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012), compassion is deeply interpersonal and cannot be separated from the persons involved as well as the relationship between them. Another important aspect of compassion that current research overlooks is the personal cost of compassion. More often than not, compassion costs the compassion-giver significant time, emotional energy, and resources. However, existing management research has focused mostly on the positive effects of compassion and has not paid much attention to the cost of compassion.

The biblical understanding of compassion does not trivialize the interpersonal commitment or the cost of compassion. The central example of biblical compassion shows God entering into a covenantal relationship with

humanity, which eventually cost God the life of His Son. Compassion in the Bible is a profoundly interpersonal and sacrificial act. Without fully understanding the interpersonal commitment or the costs of compassion, encouraging compassion can potentially lead to misunderstanding and compassion fatigue.

COMPASSION IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Compassion as Emotive-Action Word that Requires Personal Involvement

The two main words in the Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT) that are often translated as “having compassion” are רָחַם (*racham*) in the OT and σπλαγχνίζομαι (*splagchnizomai*) in the NT. Interestingly, both words point to the internal organs of the human body. In particular, the Greek word σπλαγχνίζομαι (*splagchnizomai*) literally means “to be moved as to one’s bowels” which the Greeks considered to be the center of human emotions. The word conjures up an image of a person going through a profound emotional experience in response to the sufferings they witness. As such, to have compassion means to deeply empathize with what others feel—especially their sorrow and pain. Interestingly, however, whenever the word compassion is used in the NT, it never remains as just a feeling. The word is used only in the Gospels, and the story invariably leads to some form of *action* that addresses the cause of the sorrow and pain, which then results in transformation of the life of the compassion-recipient. The Swiss reformed theologian Karl Barth (2009) emphasizes this aspect of compassionate *action* in the NT by arguing, “compassion is the behavior in which someone steps in for another person who is in need, someone who is there for and acts for that other person. Jesus is the one who in this sense had compassion” (p. 23).

The Gospel writers often mention how Jesus was “moved with compassion” and become involved in the lives of those with whom He had compassion (Matt. 9:36; Matt. 18:27; Mark 1:41; Luke 7:13). For example, the first time the word compassion is used in the NT is in Matthew 9:36. In the early period of his public ministry, Jesus moves through cities and villages teaching the Gospel of the Kingdom and healing every disease and affliction. As the news of Jesus’ miraculous healings spread, large crowds of people who were afflicted began to gather around him. When he saw the crowds, “*he had compassion for them*, because they were harassed

and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36, ESV). This compassion led him to an action that directly addressed the situation. In the following passage, Jesus called his disciples and explained the needs he saw. Then, he set aside twelve disciples and “gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction.” (Matthew 10:1, ESV). In other words, the first organization that Jesus created to minister to the people stemmed from his compassion.

This pattern of compassion leading to personal involvement and action is consistently displayed in the New Testament. Jesus’ compassion for the people moved him to heal the sick (Matt. 14:14), feed the hungry (Matt. 15:32, Mark 8:2), open the blind’s eyes (Mark 1:41), teach those who were hungry for truth (Mark 6:34), and raise a dead person to life (Luke 7:13). Even in the parables that Jesus told the crowds, compassion leads to personal involvement and an action that transforms lives. For example, in the well-known story of the Good Samaritan, compassion moved the Samaritan to bind up the wounds of his fellow journeyman and take him to an inn to care for him (Luke 10:33). Similarly, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, compassion caused the father to run toward his returning son to embrace him and welcome him back (Luke 15:20). In all the twelve instances the word compassion (*splagchnizomai*) is used in the New Testament, it leads to personal engagement and remedial action that transforms lives.

From the New Testament perspective, therefore, compassion is not just about sympathizing with someone, but also acting on the sympathy through personal involvement to resolve the cause of the pain or suffering. In essence, it is an emotive-action word that links a person’s emotion (or heart) and action (or behavior). This emotive-action aspect of compassion in the New Testament is quite similar to the contemporary definition of compassion in organizational studies—i.e. a three-part process that comprises noticing, feeling, and responding to others’ suffering. However, the New Testament also offers a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of compassion that emphasizes the holistic involvement of the compassion-giver, interpersonal commitment, and costly sacrifice that comes with compassion.

Compassion Requires Holistic Personal Involvement and Interpersonal Commitment

The biblical teaching on compassion emphasizes that God is compassionate (Exodus 34:6). In his book, *Theology for the Community of God*, Stanley Grenz (2000)

writes, “At the center of the faith of the Hebrew community stood a declaration of God’s compassion, which the Book of Exodus describes as having its source in God Himself.” The Bible also teaches that compassion is most clearly demonstrated in the incarnation of Christ. Torrance (2015) writes that compassion “does not simply describe the emotions of Jesus; it describes his act, the act in which the whole person and existence and life of Jesus is involved” (p. 133). The biblical understanding of compassion starts from the fact that compassion flows out of God’s very being (Exodus 34:6; James 5:11) and that God demonstrated compassion through the giving of his son to become a human being in order that he can be the perfect atoning sacrifice for all (John 1:14; Colossians 2:9,19; 1 John 4:10). The act of God’s personal commitment to humanity in a covenantal relationship is an essential part of the biblical understanding of compassion.

Thus, in the biblical understanding, compassion and the compassion-giver are not separable. For example, compassion is not something that a malevolent person can occasionally exercise when he or she feels like it. Compassionate acts become compassion only when they flow out of the compassion-giver’s heart and character. As God’s compassion led to his holistic involvement in human history through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the biblical understanding of compassion demand holistic and personal involvement in other’s suffering. Moreover, compassion also requires the creation of an interpersonal space where a relationship is established so that the mutually recognized acts of giving and receiving can take place in that space. Even the ravishing compassion of God’s sacrificial act can be perceived simply as “foolishness” or “a stumbling block” to those who are not “called” and reject the message (1 Corinthians 1:22).

In his book, *Reaching Out*, the theologian and psychologist, Henri Nouwen (1998) questions, “how many leave the hospital healed of their physical illness but hurt in their feelings by the impersonal treatment they received; how many return from their consultations with psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers or counselors, increasingly irritated by the non-committal attitude and professional distance they encounter?” (pp. 65–66). This question makes a profound statement that even acts of charity and care, if they are impersonally given, will not be perceived as compassion. As such, genuine exchange of compassion requires holistic personal involvement and interpersonal commitment. The biblical compassion as demonstrated in the incarnated life, death, and resurrection of Christ highlights the importance of the holistic interpersonal commitment.

Compassion is Costly

Given that compassion entails holistic personal involvement in others' suffering and requires actions to remedy the situation, it often comes at a significant cost to the compassion-giver. God's compassion for human suffering under the yoke of sin led him to empty himself and become fully incarnate as a human being (Philippians 2:5-8; Hebrews 2:14-18). In his great compassion, Christ even embraced all the physical, emotional, and psychological sufferings that humanity experienced (1 Peter 4:1), so that He can help us in all our temptations and weaknesses (Hebrews 2:18). In order to redeem us from the curse of sin, Christ made the ultimate atoning sacrifice of death on the cross (Romans 5:8). Thus, Torrance (2015) writes that "the act of compassion in which Jesus became one body with us, poured himself out in love, and took upon himself our iniquities and disease was *an awful act*" that cost him "infinite anguish" (p. 134). In other words, God's compassion was infinitely costly.

All the actions and works of Jesus on earth are extensions of this life-giving compassion. When Jesus was moved with compassion to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and raise the dead, he fully experienced all their emotional agony. In the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from death, John records that Jesus empathized with the emotional pain of Mary and Martha so deeply that he wept (John 11:35). Jesus' ministry of compassion required him to personally step into the lives of the people and sacrificially give his time, energy, resources, and even his life (Matt 14:14-16; Mark 1:32; Luke 4:40). In order to save those whom he loved, he went through the excruciating physical and emotional pain that culminated in the death on the cross. The author of Hebrews writes that Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, was even tempted in every way, so that he can fully empathize with our weaknesses (Hebrews 4:15).

Jesus' teaching also describes compassion as a costly engagement with the suffering. For example, in the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37), the Samaritan interrupted his journey to care for the wounded man due to his compassion. From an economic point of view, this act of interrupting his journey itself was costly, since it incurred a significant opportunity cost (i.e. the cost of the best alternative that must be forgone in order to care for the wounded person). The Samaritan traveler bandaged the injured man's wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then, he brought him to an inn and took care of him at his own expense. He also gave two denarii (equivalent to two day's wage for a laborer) to the inn-

keeper asking him to take care of the man. He even promised to reimburse any extra expense that the innkeeper may incur. There was a significant cost to being genuinely compassionate. The priest and Levite in the story passed by on the other side because they did not want to bear the cost of compassion.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF COMPASSION IN ORGANIZATIONS

The New Testament understanding of compassion as an action word that is prompted by inner feeling and conviction largely agrees with the current definition of compassion in organizational research that conceptualizes compassion as a three-part process of noticing, feeling, and responding to others' suffering. The New Testament, however, places much greater emphasis on the holistic personal involvement of the compassion-giver and the interpersonal commitment. Moreover, the Christian theology of compassion does not trivialize the cost of compassion. Despite the potentially immense cost of compassion, we are called to emulate God's compassion (Col. 3:12). But, how can we emulate such immense compassion?

People-centered and Interpersonal Compassion Organizing

Peter Drucker (2009), who is often regarded as the father of modern management theories, argued that understanding people and helping them develop their full potential is the essence of management. For example, In his interview with *Industry Week* magazine, he said, "I would hope that American managers... continue to appreciate what I have been saying almost from day one: that management is so much more than exercising rank and privilege, that it is much more than 'making deals.' Management affects people and their lives" (p. 300). The study of compassion in organizations begins from this important assumption that people matter and the success of an organization depends on the social and emotional health of its people. The question is how organizations can exercise compassion effectively and sustainably.

When people move into positions of authority in organizations, they tend to stray further away from employees' personal needs and feelings and focus more on broader organizational issues, such as strategy or their own personal achievement (Sutton, 2009). To be compassionate leaders, managers must be intentional about giving

attention to people's worries and pains and be willing to be involved in addressing their suffering. Compassion can be expressed in many different ways. Sometimes, just sitting down with someone who is going through difficulties and listening can have a transformative effect. At other times, the compassion-giver needs to take up the risk and responsibility to address the causes of others' suffering. This is how Wayne Alderson, vice president of operations at Pittron Steel, exercised his compassion with workers at his factory.

In October of 1972, workers at Pittron Steel walked out of their job in protest. The strike lasted for 84 days. The workers were protesting the company's undignified treatment of workers, dirty and dangerous working conditions, and broken promises. According to the workers' comments, the management considered the workers as "second-class citizens and a bum.... The work was hard but a man don't mind working if people speak to you right.... If things didn't change, we were going to burn this place down" (as cited in Sproul, 1980, pp. 45–46). It was clear that there was a tremendous animosity between the management and the workers.

In the midst of such a crisis ridden with hostility, one of the managers at the plant, Wayne Alderson, was moved with compassion for the workers. In his biographical account of what happened at Pittron Steel, Alderson recalls, "I saw men outside, standing around the drum fires and huddling near a makeshift shed. I thought about their families. It was Christmas. The strike meant no paycheck. It meant few, if any, presents for the children.... It all seemed so unnecessary, so useless. But I was convinced they weren't wrong. If I were a union man under those conditions, I would have closed the plant down. I would have struck" (as cited in Sproul, 1980, pp. 45–46). Out of his compassion and conviction, Alderson approached the company's president and proposed a plan he called "Operation Turnaround," which eventually healed the broken relationship and completely turned the company around.

One of the first things he did in the turnaround plan was to "walk with the men." He learned the names of more than three hundred workers at the factory and regularly stopped to chat with them. He even tried the work of some men and publicly recognized their contribution to the firm. Wayne also visited workers in their home in times of personal suffering. If workers' family members become hospitalized, he would visit the family at the hospital on his way home. He became deeply involved in the lives of the workers and commiserated with them.

During the national gasoline shortage in 1974, Wayne insisted on providing free gas to workers to alleviate their difficulties. He emphasizes that compassion is "not merely feeling concern for people but showing it in visible, concrete, daily actions" (as cited in Sproul, 1980, p. 65). His actions and intentions were to value the workers as persons and respect them for who they are. It began with being personally involved in the lives of workers and creating an interpersonal space between them where trust could develop. The actions to address the suffering of the workers were built upon that interpersonal trust and compassionate care.

The outcome of such practice of compassion was astounding. During the 21 months of Operation Turnaround, the productivity of workers went up 64%, and the labor grievances declined from as many as 12 per week to one per year. Chronic absenteeism at the factory virtually disappeared, and the quality of the product became the best in the history of the plant. The company benefited from the increased productivity and worker morale. The sales from the factory increased by 400% and profits rose 30%. By any measure, Operation Turnaround was a great success.

The biblical understanding of compassion fundamentally stems from God's compassion for humanity that manifests itself in the incarnation of Christ. It begins with God being personally involved in our sufferings by sharing our humanity and taking our inequities upon him to deal with them once and for all (Hebrews 7:27). This understanding has some practical implications for compassion in organizations. While organizational practices can reflect compassion, compassion is ultimately embodied in people created in the image of a compassionate God. Transformative compassion requires personal involvement and the creation of interpersonal space where the meaning of compassionate acts can be mutually understood.

Without that mutual and interpersonal space, acts of compassion can easily be misinterpreted. If decoupled from the persons involved and the relationship, even genuine gestures of compassion could be seen as something completely different in the eyes of compassion-recipients. For example, with Operation Turnaround at Pittron Steel, the workers at first flatly rejected Wayne's compassionate actions as devious schemes by the management. Most of them even refused to shake Wayne's hands when Wayne attempted to thank them at the end of their shifts. It was only when they began to develop a relationship with Wayne and saw his actions as extensions of his

character and genuine care that they began to appreciate his actions.

For compassion to have a transformative impact, it cannot be decoupled from the persons involved—both compassion-giver and recipient. This aspect of personal involvement and the need for interpersonal space in transformative compassion offers a cautionary note to modern organizations' attempt to institutionalize compassion. As more firms recognize the transformative effects of compassion, some organizations attempt to institutionalize compassion through prescribed organizational practices, such as various leave of absence policies or benefits programs. While these policies are certainly commendable and need to be encouraged, if they are instituted without being grounded in interpersonal relations that bring meaning to the compassionate acts, then they are unlikely to have the intended transformative effects on people. Impersonal compassion at the organizational level can easily turn into entitlements from the employees' perspective (Bardwick, 1991; Naumann, Minsky, & Sturman, 2002), and prescribed policies that are decoupled from interpersonal relations can easily be regarded as just that—i.e. organizational policies. Transformative compassion is quintessentially interpersonal in that it flows out of the character of compassionate persons and cannot simply be institutionalized through organizational policies.

Organizational research on interpretive schemes in firms largely confirm that even a simple company policy can convey different meanings to different organizational actors if their interests and values are not aligned (Pfeffer, 1981; Smircich, 1983). Depending on the interpretation of actors, the same organizational practice can lead to vastly different outcomes. Nishii, Lepak and Schneider (2008) argue that, even for benevolent human resource practices, they “first have to be perceived and interpreted subjectively by employees” in order to influence employee behavior (p. 504). Likewise, the meaning of compassion is subject to interpretations by those involved.

In the story of Wayne Alderson, it was not just the actions and policies that transformed the plant. Workers embraced Operation Turnaround only when they saw that the new policies had a committed champion and realized that Wayne's motives and actions were genuine. Wayne led by personally getting involved in restoring trust and mending the broken relationship. Interestingly, at the height of the success of the Operation Turnaround, Pittron Steel was sold to a mining firm, Bucyrus-Erie. The new owners liked the Operation Turnaround practices that Wayne initiated but did not like Wayne's deep

involvement in the lives of workers. In particular, the new owners demanded that Wayne give up his “involvement with the men and the chapel-under-the-open-hearth” where Wayne met with workers weekly for a Bible study. When Wayne replied that he could not do so, he was fired. After Wayne's departure, the relationship between management and labor at Pittron quickly deteriorated even though many of the policies remained the same. Without the interpersonal commitment between them or the new management's personal involvement, the policies and practices that Wayne has instituted quickly lost relevance.

Some management literature on compassion recognizes that one of the most fundamental characteristics of compassion is its relationality, since compassion manifests itself in the relational space between the people engaged in compassion (Frost et al., 2006; Frost, Dutton, Worline, & Wilson, 2000; Kanov et al., 2004). Wilkerson and Gerdes (2015) argue that even in formulating policies for accommodating employees with disabilities, firms need to develop mutually empowering solutions based on the relationship. Therefore, in order to create a compassionate workplace, it's important for organizations to foster a culture of compassion organizing among employees. Such a culture often begins with managers who lead by example. A leader's example can set the tone for the organization's culture and send important signals about what is legitimate and desirable behavior in the organization. The cultural shift can be reinforced by giving permission to employees to exercise their innate capacity to demonstrate compassion. In other words, instead of delineating how to exercise compassion, organizations can empower employees by giving them permission and freedom to carry out acts of compassion in their own way (Dutton et al., 2006).

To be sure, instituting compassionate policies (e.g. more benefits as well as rules and training for compassion) is also necessary for a wider application of compassion. Just as God “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” regardless of their relationship with God (Matthew 5:45), compassion can be extended to all through benevolent policies and practices. However, in order for compassionate acts to have a transformative effect in organizations, it is important to embed the policies in the interpersonal fabric of the organization and have a champion who genuinely appreciates the policies and is willing to lead by example. The goal is not making the organization more compassionate but creating and

increasing collective capacity for compassion organizing within the organization. In other words, there can be no organizational compassion but only people exercising compassion in organizations.

Sustainable Practice of Compassion

In the Bible, compassion is not a concept, but a practice that stems from a deep sense of sympathy for the plight of others. In a powerful way, God has exemplified for us how to be compassionate. While the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, described Greek gods as the unmoved movers, the 20th century Jewish philosopher, Abraham Heschel, described the God of the Bible as “the most moved mover.” As shown above, Jesus was often moved by compassion to sympathize with others’ suffering and act to mitigate the suffering. God has also seen humanity’s suffering and acted on his compassion in the most compassionate way possible: “This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins” (1 John 4:10, NLT). As followers of Christ, we are called to do likewise.

Having told the story of the Good Samaritan who showed compassion on the wounded man, Jesus asks the lawyer, “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” When the lawyer answered “the one who showed him mercy,” Jesus simply tells him, “*You go, and do likewise*” (Luke 10:36, 37). For Christians, compassion is not a choice but an imperative. We are called to pay attention to others’ suffering, sympathize with them, and act to alleviate their pain. Christ exhorts his listeners not to just talk about compassion, but to lead by example by getting involved and doing something about others’ pain.

While we are called to emulate God’s compassion, it is also important to recognize that we are still human beings with our innate weaknesses and limitations. Compassion is a costly endeavor. Genuine compassion involves the compassion-giver imaginatively entering into the compassion-recipient’s condition and feeling similar fear, stress, and pain. These feelings can also profoundly affect the compassion-giver. Modern research on caring professionals such as psychologists, doctors, and nurses shows that traumatic stress not only takes a toll on victims but also on the professionals who care for them (Figley, 1995; Selby, 2014). These professionals can experience “compassion fatigue,” which is characterized as the emotional and physical exhaustion they experience secondarily as a result of their exposure to the suffering of compassion-recipients.

Compassion fatigue can affect even the most caring workers. In fact, the research shows that “those who have enormous capacity for feeling and empathy tend to be more at risk of compassion stress” (Figley, 2013, p. 1). That is why the American Psychological Association’s *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* encourages professional psychologists to be on self-alert for possible vicarious traumatization, and if needed, “take appropriate measures, such as obtaining professional consultation or assistance, and determine whether they should limit, suspend, or terminate their work-related duties” (American Psychological Association, 2010, p. 5). That is also why missionaries have furloughs every five to six years, so that they can rest and be restored (Warner, 2011).

One of the reasons why God instituted Sabbath is for us to rest and be refreshed (Exodus 31:17). God intended the whole creation—including humanity—to regularly rest to be replenished with necessary resources and restored to functional capacity (Exodus 20:11). The Sabbath rest reminds us that it is God who ultimately sustains us and the world (Seibert & Ashley, 2015). God has instituted Sabbath, so that we can “cultivate a spiritual attitude of rest, joy, freedom, and celebration in God and the gift of his creation” without being completely depleted (Heintzman, 2015, p. 18). People working in care-giving industries need the rest and space for restoration all the more because their continued future service depends on their sufficient renewal (Cafferky, 2015).

As such, it is important for us to be not just compassion-givers, but also compassion-recipients. The object of compassion must also include ourselves. We need to care for ourselves by recognizing our limits and regularly taking time to be replenished. Even Jesus intentionally took time away from his ministry of teaching and healing to be alone and pray (Matt. 14:23; Luke 9:18). He regularly withdrew Himself to solitary places just to spend time with the Father (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16). We need this time of rest and renewed dependence on God precisely because we are limited in our ability and sinful. Thus, Jesus commends us to “find a quiet, secluded place so you won’t be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.” (Matthew 6:6, The Message)

God calls us to be compassionate, and compassionate acts often bring joy and blessings to the compassion-givers (Luke 6:38). Contemporary research also shows that compassion produces a positive communal outcome from which the giver also benefits (Lilius et al., 2008). While

there are certainly tangible or intangible rewards one gets in the acts of compassion, compassion is still a costly endeavor. Furthermore, we need to recognize the fact that we can't solve all problems. As human beings, all of us have a limited supply of time, effort, and resources. When we offer compassion to someone, due to our limitations, we may be withholding the compassion from others who need it. For example, when we give time and effort to exercise compassion to a co-worker, we may be withholding it from a family member who may also need our time and attention. Knowing our limitations and making appropriate choices from that vantage point is an important foundation for the sustainable practice of compassion.

Lastly, compassion in the Bible goes together with righteousness and justice. God is compassionate, but he is also perfectly righteous and just. As such, compassion must be balanced with just and righteous management (Proverbs 25:5). Consequently, compassionate management does not mean just soft management that avoids strong demands or conflicts. Just like loving children does not mean avoiding discipline or setting high expectations, compassionate management does not shy away from constructive conflicts or pressures. On the contrary, compassionate leaders often expect much from their employees in order to help them develop their full potential. They also let employees be fully who they are because compassion becomes more real when people can be authentic about their feelings and experiences. However, compassionate leaders also pay a close attention to the needs and feelings of their people because they know that is when they can make the greatest difference in the lives of their people.

CONCLUSION

As people created in the image of a compassionate God, each of us has the capacity for compassion, and compassion satisfies our deep longing for meaning in life. Social scientists have long recognized this innate human desire for longing. In his treatise, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith (2010) argues that most people take an interest in the fortune of others and are willing to show compassion “though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it.” Another keen observer of human society, Alexis de Tocqueville (2004) writes, “in democratic ages, men rarely sacrifice themselves for one another, but they do exhibit a general compassion for all members of the human species” (p. 658).

As scientists see compassion as a positive social trait that can counterbalance self-interested and egoistic individual tendencies (Hirschman, 2013; Hobbes, 2015; Schopenhauer, 1995), some researchers seek ways to encourage compassionate behavior using various methods such as positive meditation or mind-training through images (Genevsky & Knutson, 2015; Jazaieri et al., 2016). While this paper recognizes the benefits of encouraging compassionate acts, it also suggests that such an instrumental and behavioral view of compassion can potentially distort our understanding of it and lead to the superficial exercise of compassion.

In contrast to the instrumental and behavioral view of compassion that treats compassion as a disembodied social response mechanism developed through evolutionary processes (Singer et al., 2004, p. 1162), the Bible offers a much fuller understanding of compassion grounded in God's compassionate character and action. A Christian understanding of compassion is ultimately founded on God's character and his response to human suffering through the incarnation of Christ (Grenz, 2000; Wuthnow, 2012). In his great mercy, Jesus Christ, the second person of the Triune God, came into the world as a mere human being (John 1:14; Hebrews 2:9), so that “he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people” (Hebrews 2:17). According to the author of Hebrews, God's compassion led him to leave his heavenly throne to share our humanity and experience all our sufferings, so that he can fully empathize with us (Hebrews 2:18). Seen from the perspective of incarnational theology, compassion takes on a much more holistic meaning—one that emphasizes the holistic involvement of the compassion-giver, interpersonal commitment, and costly sacrifice that comes with compassion.

The biblical understanding of compassion that is demonstrated through Christ's incarnation requires interpersonal involvement. Organizational practices of compassion such as bereavement leave and various employee benefits are certainly commendable endeavors and need to be encouraged. However, without the interpersonal space for meaning-making and the personal involvement of someone who genuinely embodies the compassion, organizational practices that began with good intentions can easily become entitlements (Bardwick, 1991; Heath, Knez, & Camerer, 1993). A transformative and sustainable compassion requires international commitment. Future researches can further explore how the meaning of compassion is constructed in organization not just from

the compassion-giver's perspective but also from the compassion recipient's perspective.

The biblical understanding of compassion also teaches us that compassionate acts can incur significant cost to the compassion-giver. While the cost is often worthwhile and tremendously rewarding, we also need to recognize that we are limited in our compassion-giving capacity. It does not mean that we avoid the responsibility of caring for the hurting like the priest and Levite in the story of Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Rather, it is about the humility of recognizing that we cannot solve all problems and allowing God to work through the whole body of Christ. Therefore, the proper exercise of compassion sometimes involves making difficult choices between different opportunities to exercise compassion and serve. It also involves self-care by intentionally taking the time to rest and allow the Holy Spirit to replenish us.

To be sure, compassion is not a unique Christian concept. Most of the world's major religions teach compassion as a central virtue (Armstrong, 2007; Wuthnow, 2012). For example, compassion is a central virtue in Buddhist ethics. In Buddhism, compassion is taught as one of the five cardinal virtues of an enlightened person (Davidson & Harrington, 2001), and in Mahayana Buddhism it is one of the two supreme virtues required to attain Buddhahood. Islam also teaches that Allah is "compassionate and merciful" and encourages Muslims to live in solidarity with suffering people (Engineer, 2003). Although the full discussion of compassion in different religious traditions is beyond the scope of this paper, it is an important topic that needs to be explored by future studies.

Despite the potential cost of compassion, God calls us to be compassionate, but his call for compassion is embedded in his own compassion. He calls us to be compassionate while fully recognizing our shortcomings and limitations. So, we heed Christ's call to be compassionate and emulate His compassion without trepidation whenever the opportunity avails, trusting that He will provide discernment and/or strength. When we do, we bring a part of His Kingdom to our organizations. This study has argued that the Bible and Christian theology offer a distinct understanding of compassion that can shed new light on compassion in an organizational context. I hope that this view of compassion grounded on incarnational theology will provide organizational leaders with a broader and more nuanced understanding of compassion that can make organizations' compassion organizing effort more transformative and sustainable.

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