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How Much Should Christians Compromise?

Philippians 2:3-4: (NASB) ³*Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.*



The ability to compromise is a lost art. We have become so diverse in our thinking, so polarized in our viewpoints and so set in our conclusions as unequivocally right, that the mere idea of compromise is in some cases viewed as a repulsive evil. Now look, there are times when compromise should be off the table. There are times when that which is right and sound should not be approached with the idea of watering it down for the sake of making someone, some group or some sect happy. But when? When do we stand as an immovable force and when do we bend and acquiesce to include the preferences of others? Fortunately for us, these very issues existed in biblical times, so we do have a pretty clear set of guidelines to follow. Is compromise good? Yes! Is compromise bad? Yes! Let us figure this out!

The early Christian church was a curious combination of devout Jews who became dedicated followers of Jesus as well as a wide variety of people from various pagan backgrounds. Each group was drawn to Christianity by the hope of the kingdom that Jesus brought, but each group naturally brought with them some of their past - their traditions, methods of thinking and experiences. That is to be expected, but when you are coming up to a higher place, you have to figure out how to let go. That is where issues came in and compromise was important.

As years went by, the cultural differences did not subside; but rather, they grew into divisive matters that each side saw as matters of principle. Sometimes we mistake passionate preferences for principles.

These events took place almost twenty years after Pentecost: Acts 15:1-3: Some were teaching that circumcision was required in order to be a Christian. This was a definitive, clearly stated, *uncompromising* pronouncement of belief.

Paul and Barnabas also had a firm, clearly-stated and uncompromising pronouncement of belief: Acts 15:4-6: Because Jesus followed the Jewish Law, the argument was that a follower would have to do the same.

Observations:

- The disagreement was dramatic as it put to question the very definition of "Christian."
- The dissension was so sharp that a special meeting of Apostles and elders was convened.
- This meeting would be a crucial event to determine the very future of Christianity.

Why the obsession with the rite of circumcision?

In times of dissension, many times our greatest enemy is not the person sitting across from us, but instead it is our own emotion on the matter.

Circumcision was more engrained in Jewish history and thinking than even the Law:

Genesis 17:1-14: The changing of Abram's name signaled the changing of his relationship with God. (Source: Biblical commentary Jamieson, Fausset and Brown) Instead of Abram, "a high father," he was to be called Abraham, "father of a multitude of nations."

This covenant included the blessing of his posterity and his posterity blessing the world and the land of Israel as well. Today, the land God gave to Abraham is in dispute. According to prophecy, we know Israel will prevail in keeping their land. The symbol of this multi-faceted covenant was the rite of circumcision. We can see why this rite was so deeply engrained in the Jewish mind - it was a symbol of God's promise over 400 years before the Ten Commandments were given!

In a marriage, compromise is one of the most fundamental management tools for success. In speaking to couples about marriage, Rick tells each person, "You have to be willing to compromise 60% of the time," in others words, you have to go more than halfway. Compromise is being willing to take extra steps because the two individuals are trying to find common ground, a common direction.



It seems probable the Apostle Paul saw this dissension brewing long before this meeting and tried to address it: Galatians 2:1-2,7,9: This showed humble leadership. Paul preached the radical gospel with full conviction, yet sought the input and blessing of those in whose shadow his spiritual opportunity was born. He had the good sense to check what he was doing against the experiences and thinking of other spiritually-minded followers.

Paul had a crystal-clear understanding of the issues yet merely planted seeds of truth. It was obvious he was given a specific direction to go. James, Cephas (Peter) and John were supposed to uphold the gospel given to the Jews. Peter opened the door to the Gentiles but that work was largely developed by the Apostle Paul. Everybody knew each had a different part to play, and so they were all working together.

First biblical principle for approaching matters that need COMPROMISE: (GIVES CLARITY) Plant and cultivate the seeds necessary to deal with a possible controversy.

Now that we are focusing on how to properly compromise, let us go back to Acts 15 and look again at some of those first few verses:

Second biblical principle for approaching matters that need compromise: (TESTS CONSCIENCE) "Receive" those with whom we are challenged.

Acts 15:4: This conveys a sense of "I am so (genuinely) happy to see you," even among those who disagree.

Hebrews 12:6: If we claim the name of Christ, we are supposed to act appropriately. When we have a disagreement with someone needing discussion and compromise, we must be able to delight in their presence and not walk away from them. We receive them and have them happily in our company. This is difficult because we are often polarized in our thinking. How often do we view those with another point of view as more of an enemy than a friend? How often are we thinking about how to upend their perspective when we meet?

Here is where our theme text shouts out our spiritual response when under such duress to want to shut down someone else's point of view: Philippians 2:3-4: Sometimes we want to make our passionately held PREFERENCES into PRINCIPLES.

Are we welcoming in our principle-based disagreements to those we may see as foes, be they fellow Christians or even unbelievers? Are we willing to share the goodness of our experience with them? Or are we beating them over the head with what we believe?

Third biblical principle for approaching matters that need compromise: (PROVOKES COMPROMISE) Allow, rather than force, the matter to be introduced in the context of the bigger and more important picture.

Acts 15:4-6: **Observations:**

- First and foremost was the report of the spreading of the Gospel to the Gentiles. They spent time discussing something with which they were all in agreement - spreading the good news of Jesus Christ.
- This dramatic report of Gentiles coming into Christianity opened up the question at hand, for the report contradicted some beliefs.
- Now came the announcement that this visit was for the settlement of this question.

Sample conversation with someone with whom you are at odds: "I am glad you are here, because we got together so I could hear your concern." Suddenly, you are no longer fighting but instead are finding a way to come together and communicate. That is how compromise can work. Do we have the wisdom and patience to wait - to hear the dissension presented to us, and therefore respond to another's concern rather than bring it up ourselves as a tool of our disdain?

Matthew 5:16: No matter who we deal with - the world or the brotherhood - our dealings should bring godly light.

All the steps discussed thus far towards executing a valuable compromise are the difficult introductory steps. Most of the time we do not have the patience or the foresight for these steps. Instead, we allow the issues we are passionate about to overrun our emotions rather than allowing the peace of God to overrule our hearts and minds.



Fourth biblical principle for approaching matters that need compromise: (GIVES CLARITY) "Debate" with the proper attitude.

Acts 15:7-11: A debate then meant seeking and questioning, listening for a response. After such an exchange, Peter does what he was called to do - he leads. He leads by patiently hearing and then summing up the heated exchange with facts that all are compelled to believe in. No one could disagree with what Peter said, as he had credibility since he was given the vision of taking the gospel to the Gentiles. **For more on this topic, please see our two-part program, "Why Cornelius? Why a Solider?" May 17, 2015 and June 14, 2015.**

¹⁰Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? The unbearable yoke was the keeping of the whole Law - only Jesus ever accomplished this. Here is why they did not need to be circumcised: ¹¹On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will. The whole point of circumcision was to look forward to the fulfillment of that great promise to Abraham. When Jesus came, he fulfilled the promise. When he lived and died, he paid the ransom so *all the families of the earth will be blessed.* Because the price has been paid, they no longer had to *look forward* to it happening; they could *look backwards* and say, "Thank God it happened!" We would now act differently. Jesus in a sense nailed the Law to the cross. We were no longer waiting for the promised Messiah - he had come.

Peter's authority source: 1. Apostleship 2. Divine revelation and 3. Observation. Peter was wise and humble during this time when leadership was needed. He could have said, "Look, I know this is right; I am basically the leader of the Apostles, so let's just do this." But he pointed to the Apostle Paul's work and showed what he was doing was undeniable.

So, the proper attitude in handling situations that may demand compromise is to be unfettered by our emotions and filled with the mercy and glory of truth. This is hard! This is strictly an internal exercise of ourselves and not in any way a judgment on others. Do not be judgmental; be representative of God through Christ. Philippians 2:3-4 Proverbs 13:10

What do I bring to the table of compromise by way of content and attitude?

Ephesians 4:29-32: When I am faced with matters of deep passion, whether it is with the brotherhood or the world, am I willing to be clear of my own emotional baggage for the sake of the clarity of truth?

Fifth biblical principle for approaching matters that need compromise: (PROVOKES COMPROMISE) Listen with the intent of hearing.

Notice the attitude of the whole congregation: Acts 15:12: This cooperative, mature attitude was more easily achieved because of the way Peter handled things. The dissension was first heard, then Peter established the undeniable facts of the path Christianity had taken. He then led all to hear through Paul the proof of the facts Peter had presented. This is the brilliance of unified and humble co-laboring.

Hebrews 5:12-14: Learning the fine art of compromise is a lesson for adult Christians, a necessary skill to apply in the use of God's word. Hebrews was written by the Apostle Paul to the Jewish Christians. In that book, he laid out how central Jesus is to the whole plan of God. They were admonished to let go of the Law because Jesus fulfilled it. Grow up to the strong meat of the gospel! What are you standing on? Do not stand on your preferences the way you would for God's principles. Too often we take the way we want to see things and make them a principle. We miss out on the ability to listen to someone who may see it differently. We miss out on the opportunity to hear other perspectives. There is no compromise on God's principles, such as when we are fighting against Satan. Stand behind the shield of faith and stand firm with the brotherhood. Compromise is when two opposing perspectives can come together and both stand behind something. It may not be perfect, but it works. The two are stronger standing together.

Sixth biblical principle for approaching matters that need compromise: (TESTS CONSCIENCE) Give proper respect and honor to the teachings of those in positions of responsibility - especially the Apostles and those who are deeply seasoned.



Acts 15:13-15,19-21: James' authority source: 1. Apostleship (not his own but Peter's) 2. Old Testament prophecy from Amos and 3. Observation. James was the chairman of this meeting and next sums up the arguments. He spoke authoritatively and was (as we shall see) clearly respected by all. He does not "give in" to any violation of the basic tenet of Christianity that shows all Christians free from the Law, but he does give some suggested behavior designed to honor and respect those of a different opinion.

Seventh biblical principle for approaching matters that need compromise: (GIVES CLARITY, TESTS CONSCIENCE, PROVOKES COMPROMISE) See the conclusions as driven by the Holy Spirit's influence on the congregation.

Acts 15:22-31: (NRSV) ²²Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They were all working together. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers, ²³with the following letter: They put their thinking about the compromise in writing, adding a level of credibility. The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. ²⁴Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, The letter was specifically to believers of Gentile origin. They are clarifying they did not send a directive; rather, there were zealous individuals who were proclaiming erroneously what they believed to be true. ²⁵we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, There was unity in this group decision. The people in Antioch were given not only the witness of Paul and Barnabas but also specific representatives who were at the debate. ²⁶who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. The power of God working through Paul and Barnabas was recognized. This all would have given great comfort to the Gentile Christians. The compromise was put in writing, it had clarification and unity and there was praise for those who put their lives on the line. Notice the complete unity of action, the honesty in correcting erroneous actions and the willingness to send out representatives, in addition to Paul and Barnabas, as verifying evidence of their decision. They went out of their way to make it clear to make sure the Gentile Christians were not going to be stumbled by other ideas. ²⁸For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: ²⁹that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

The recommendation was to act in a way that would respect the consciences of those whose viewpoint was not yet fully mature in Christ. They determined this wisdom to be driven of God's own influence. The reception of this compromise was received with rejoicing which gives us insight into the spiritual maturity of those at Antioch. A "babe" in Christ would most probably grumble thinking that these others had no right to impose anything upon them - what a lost privilege that attitude would bring! "If the Apostles and elders said this is what we ought to do to help everyone get along, why wouldn't I follow this?"

The outcome of all this is the breathtaking beauty of the body of Christ: Ephesians 2:14-22: It is all about Jesus and not my opinion or your opinion. Jesus is the centerpiece. Instead of circumcision or the Law, it is Jesus. Instead of pagan rituals, it is Jesus. Instead of everything else in life, it is Jesus. So, if in our working together we need to sacrifice certain things so we can come closer to the hub, the centerpiece of Jesus, then let it be so with our compromise.

Godly compromise is one of the highest and most sacred gifts of sacrifice we can give to God, for it shows our care and respect for others while keeping our highest spiritual principles intact.

Romans 12:10: (KJV) *Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honor preferring one another.*

**So, how much should Christians compromise?
For Jonathan and Rick and Christian Questions...
Think about it...!**