

THE SINFUL SIDE OF COMPROMISE

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“Judge not” has become the favorite Bible verse of the modern world. Standards of all kinds have been tossed aside, giving way to an ever-deepening trend of relativism. “Truth” by definition, has ceased to be a constant absolute and has changed into a circumstantial, emotion-based blur. Convictions about good and evil have been traded for tolerance and a mentality that says “If it feels good, do it.”¹

The greatest threat to the church today is incremental relativism. For this reason, fighting every battle of “spiritual inches” should be taken as seriously as an all-out, frontal assault by the enemy. Most mainstream Christians do not recognize Satan’s strategy. In as much as the enemy’s approach generates short-term affects that creep beneath the threshold of contemporary concern, the Christian community stereotypically will not bother to fight the fight or hold the ground. They rationalize, “what’s the big deal... it’s not worth risking the alienation of these people.” As a result, the same body of believers currently characterized as falling asleep at the wheel, will one day wake up only to realize that they and the society they represent have drifted dangerously off course – all in tiny, inch-long increments. Unfortunately, too often, in terms of individuals and cultures, by the time the situation is recognized, the mooring is lost and the original standards are suddenly deceptively distant. Consequently, this aspect of Satan’s plan bolsters the enemy’s resolve and challenges the Christian’s compass. Make no mistake, to safeguard against such debauchery, God gave us biblical standards to under-gird, build, protect and advance the church. To ignore or dilute this reality is to erode the long-term health and Scriptural identity of the body of Christ. Dismissing such a truth as legalistic deontology, assumedly insensitive to the heart of the Gospel, is unfounded and without justification. The absolute truths of Scripture and God’s clear standards for His people represent the framework, within which the masterpiece of personal servanthood is to be lived out autonomously.

¹ Daniel W. Jarvis, *The Need for Truth: Why our world needs absolute truth – and why each of us must decide*, accessed 15 April 2003, <http://www.absolutetruth.net>; Internet

Social Implications of Compromise

“The culture we are living in becomes an ever-wider sewer.”² These words were spoken by a prominent politician on the heels of President Clinton’s defiant impeachment posture. While our country was divided on the political implications of the matter, the apparent dismissal of principal and the compromise of moral, ethical standards were obvious to nearly all. Unfortunately, the standard-shattering events embodied in the impeachment process gave both credibility and celebrity to the already active, dismissive and deviant assault on traditional Christian ethics.

A study showing the current condition and historical advances made to substantiate this position was conducted by Paul Ray, who heads American LIVES Inc., a market research firm that specializes in studying the effects of moral values on consumer choices. Following is a summary of his findings:

“...a new set of cultural values is beginning to emerge, challenging the two-dimensional mind-set of the Christian conservatives... the emergence of a third world of meaning and values, a rising cultural dimension that appeals to nearly one-fourth of American adults... The term for them is the Cultural Creatives... They don’t adhere to the traditional values of what Ray calls Heartlanders, who represent about 29 percent of America. Nor are they the rational, materialistic and ultrapragmatic Moderns, a cultural wave that arose in the 1920’s and now makes up 47 percent of America.”³ “Heartlanders have come to represent a small percentage of the adult population, from 55 percent just after World War II to the current 29 percent figure... They’re the trailing edge and are in decline”⁴ “...there are calls for the development of an ‘integrated culture,’ one that recognizes the strengths and weaknesses of America’s three sets of value systems and is able to synthesize a new working set of values from them.”⁵ “What most fail to realize is that those traditional values form a cultural bedrock that is the foundation for the other value systems. If the bedrock is eroded, the other systems fail. ‘If we lose that first system, we lose direction, we lose our moral

² RNS, “Moral Collapse?” *Christian Century* 116 (1999): 271

³ RNS, “Moral Collapse?,” 271

⁴ RNS, “Moral Collapse?,” 272

⁵ RNS, “Moral Collapse?,” 272

compass and the proper foundations of more complex thinking.”⁶ “Unless you have people learning how to do right, a system based on doing good will collapse.”⁷

When we are faced with debates over what constitutes right versus wrong and the subsequent, subjective interpretations of how to define the difference between good and evil, the concept of compromise becomes difficult to define. MacIver addressed the issue from its genesis when he said: “The word ‘compromise’ itself has caused a great deal of semantic difficulty. Nobody knows what it means. Like so many words coming down through the centuries, it takes on different color in different periods.”⁸ Deductively, one is therefore led to believe that right and wrong are also subject to seasonal changes. Compromise undergoes a metamorphosis when truth and moral standards are said to shift. While the color gray is a combination of black and white, in its state of gray, one is hard pressed to find identifiable components of either polarized color. So it is with truth and moral standards in the midst of societal haze. While most people within the society will acknowledge the presence of right and wrong, few are willing or able to define and defend the cultural norms that represent the boundaries of society’s uncompromised correctness.

In a sad commentary on the sinful demise of a society that truly defines and reshapes its standards on a chronological continuum, Eugene Borowitz offered the following observation.

“The genius of secularity, its openness to new truth, has proved its undoing... The human spirit, uprooted from its biblical ground, may now be directed to the service of what not so long ago would have been perceived as monstrous evil.”⁹

Lest one doubt the reality of such consequences, an overview of the American family and societal norms over the last forty years paints a very clear picture. In little more than what

⁶ RNS, “Moral Collapse?,” 272

⁷ RNS, “Moral Collapse?,” 273

⁸ R.M. MacIver, *Integrity and Compromise* (New York: The Institute for Religious and Social Studies, 1957) 2.

⁹ Eugene B. Borowitz, “Exploration and Responses: Religious Values in a Secular Society,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 21:3 (1984): 539

constitutes a biblical generation, our slow but steady acceptance of compromise has eroded the moral, Christian fibers from the fabric of our cultural norms. Bill Bennet takes on the most militant naysayer with the following capsule of clarity:

“Shall I recount the damage once more? Since 1960, the divorce rate has more than doubled, out-of-wedlock births have skyrocketed from one in twenty to one in three, the percentage of single-parent families has more than tripled, the number of couples cohabitating has increased more than elevenfold, the fertility rate has decreased by almost half. In record numbers we have seen fathers deserting their wives and children – and being permitted to do so without reproach or penalty of any kind. We have seen stay-at-home mothers mocked. We have seen the advent of something called the ‘parent deficit’ – a polite way of saying that many parents are, in effect, absent from their children’s lives.”¹⁰

Mr. Bennet’s recounting of the aforementioned demographic demise and behavioral perversions reflect the predictable outcome of a culture that champions compromise. When shades of gray represent the goal of society, there will naturally follow an atmosphere lacking both the bright replenishing goodness of white and the clearly recognizable and obviously dangerous backdrop of black.

A Christian family living within such a society will be challenged in much the same way an eternal optimist is affected when surrounded by the dreariest of pessimists. Three options exist. The first two involve one party converting the other’s disposition, while the third alternative is to coexist amidst constant tension. As uncompromising members of the faith, Christian families are to choose “offense” from the first two options and boldly accept (while constantly attempting to convert) option three, without sacrificing standards in the interest of comfort. To that end, Mr. Bennet underscores the relationship between families and the Christian health of their society in the following way.

“...the family is and always has been the first and most important incubator of those habits of trust, altruism, responsibility, and mutual obligation on which civil society depends”¹¹

¹⁰ William J. Bennet, *The Broken Hearth*, (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press 2001) 179.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 178

Compromise In The Church

When addressing society and denoting broad, general observations on the degradation of moral standards, most conscientious adults acknowledge the condition and wax nostalgic for the good old days. Ironically, while nearly all respondents recognize the avalanche-like shift in their societal norms, very few openly admit to any personal movement underfoot.

I am reminded of the Proverbial swarm of locust. In this case, society is the swarm, the individual or family is likened to a single locust (simply blending in and doing what everyone else is doing, and is expected to do) – all the while advancing at a breakneck pace, devastating everything in its path, while remaining void of any collective conscious. Even with the ability to look back and survey the consequences of compromised choice (as noted in Bennet’s observation,) there remains far too large a vacuum of courage and commitment to Christian standards. Unfortunately, like participants in the locust swarm, believers are too easily satisfied with simply putting one foot in front of the other and following the body immediately in front of them.

Christians who choose to live in such a way, either by choice or default, are at best spiritually lazy. Sadly, they rest in the comfort of disillusioned community, under the empty assurance of sheer numbers. One can imagine them thinking, it must be okay if all these people are doing it. Like the swarm, there is no individual responsibility, for there is no individual leader. Whatever happens, the “swarm/society” did it... not me. Unfortunately, for the passive, noncommittal Christian or the passionate uninformed believer, such an approach does not represent healthy, Christ-like faith. On the contrary, we are called to proactively share the accurate, uncompromised and complete Gospel. As believers, we are charged with making disciples of the lost. We are to take responsibility for leading the swarm or at least make a genuine effort to redirect our closest neighbors.

In chastising such a significant portion of God’s flock, a critical analysis of compromise in the church would be woefully incomplete without addressing the shepherds of said sheep and the conditions under which this disease is spreading. At the onset, once again

risking the blanketing disregard of a deontological label, it is important to note that maintaining the highest of standards can and should represent the purest form of Christian love. Those of us who agree that there is but one Creator, one plan for humanity, one standard-giver for all and one blue-print to be used in the establishment of every individual's priorities, passions and purpose should likewise agree that seeing clearly, understanding fully and bringing to fruition the intent of that blue-print is the best thing for every living person. With that said, there is no better way to advance the uncompromised will of God than to fervently work to crystallize the clarity of Scripture, while shining the Bible's light of absolute truth upon the dimly lit shadows of society - where Satan lurks and deceives. Compromise is the moisture that makes slick the peripheral banks of life's most scenic and treacherous rivers. Moreover, Martin Luther once called "reason the Devil's whore." If he was correct, this writer would submit that "compromise" is the madam of "reason's" brothel. If "reason" is a spark, compromise is a flame. What "reason" initiates, compromise completes.

Without pretending to encompass all the facades of compromise in mainline Christian churches, this paper will concentrate on one church-driven contributor to the Gospel's diluted message. The "church growth movement" has evolved into a hybrid of strategic marketing and outreach evangelism. Like so many other byproducts of societal advance, the church growth phenomena is a self-contained paradox representing both the best and worst of potential.

It is important to clarify that this paper is not an indictment against the church growth movement. On the contrary, as noted above, the church growth movement inherently represents the potential embodiment of the great commission and Acts 1:8. When approached with a Gospel centered, SOUL seeking, prayerfully fueled and Spirit led heart, endeavoring to grow our churches is uncompromisingly biblical. However, there is a subtle, yet "life or death" difference, between adding to the body of believers and filling sanctuaries with additional head-count.

To further the concept of church growth being a soul-centered, Christ-like undertaking, Peter Monkres challenged his readers to remember that souls do not always congregate in large, single dwellings. He reminds us that growth can occur in two ways. In

addition to using the mega-church model, growth can and does occur more effectively, albeit without the superficial recognition, through exponentially, self-regenerating smaller home churches and the like. In his article entitled *Small Is Beautiful: Churches as if People Mattered*, Monkres clarified the following:

“The ministry of the Christ frees us from the tyranny of statistics... For Jesus, bigger is not necessarily better. The temple that holds thousands is no more significant than the humble house church... Although ‘growth is good’ is undoubtedly an orthodox position, it may also be a heretical one, since the church’s final concern is not to increase its budget and membership figures but rather to serve people.”¹²

As a side note, it is worthy of mention that this problem has an equally menacing counter-balance. Those churches which unequivocally write off all growth and outreach initiatives under the guises of protecting the traditional approaches to ministry are simply irresponsible stewards. William Willimon presents this stereotypical congregation by suggesting the gist of their message to be: “So let’s huddle closer together, and minister to each other and label that ‘evangelism’ or ‘mission.’ Let’s play church.”¹³ Lest one ask what genuine church is, Willimon responds bluntly, “A faith that is not contagious, that is not incendiary – whatever it may be, it is not the Christian faith.”¹⁴

Having identified the peripheral boundaries of the discussion, it is time to zero in on the specific component of the Christian community that this paper aims to address. Improperly motivated, “quantity-over-quality,” church growth advocates and practitioners are the demographic niche to which this paper is targeted. A logical first question might be: how are these churches defined and recognized. In a paper presented to the Evangelical Theological

¹² Peter Monkres, “Small Is Beautiful: Churches as if People Mattered,” *Christian Century* 95 (1999): 493

¹³ William H. Willimon, “To Stop or Start a Fire,” *Christian Century* 98 (1981): 925

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 925

Society, Bob Wilkins did an outstanding job of answering that question. His response cuts through the surface issues and gets to the core of the issue.

“What is a church-growth church? This can be defined in many ways. Some might say that all seeker-sensitive churches are church-growth churches. I would prefer to say that seeker-driven churches are church-growth churches. The difference is one of degree and intent. A church-growth church is thus one that is striving to break growth barriers and which *determines what it will preach based on what the audience wants and will accept.*”¹⁵

Wilkin makes one additional, tongue-in-cheek observation in his paper that will undoubtedly graze off the hardened heart of the professional “ministry-marketer.” However, it should stop cold those whose intent is spiritually sincere, albeit lost in the momentum of the movement. With an “ends don’t justify the means” motif, Wilkin penned: “I find it strange that in an effort to produce church growth, churches compromise the only message that can truly add people to the church.”¹⁶ The congregations and individual leaders to which this remark applies are the champions of compromise targeted in the body of this paper. These people are the purveyors of compromise in the realm of Christian purpose, priority and passion. It is against the backdrop of this cancerous Christian condition that I ardently defend the deontological-like position of standard-bearer and defender of absolute truth. What rings of legalism in a vacuum, sounds of clarity and orthodoxy in the face of misguided, ministerial distortion.

Ralph Elliot takes us inside this problem of misaligned motives and compromised Christian leadership in his article, *Dangers of the Church Growth Movement*. In the context of his work, he offers both a generic indictment of the tactics involved and a rather pointed challenge to the un-Christ-like calculating and divisive methodology too often employed.

“Movement adherents suggest that a higher rate of conversion growth can be predicted for the homogeneous church; it is important that people can ‘feel at home’ and know that they

¹⁵ Bob Wilkin, “The Subtle Danger of Compromising the Gospel Message in Order to Build a Bigger Congregation” (paper presented at the meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Philadelphia, PA, 16-18 November 1995), 2.

¹⁶ Ibid., 9

are among ‘our kind of people.’ Over and over the literature stresses that ‘men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers.’ The movement seeks to rebut the work of Jurgen Moltmann, for instance, who argues in his *Religion, Revolution and the Future* that the church, to be authentic, must be heterogeneous, reconciling the educated and the uneducated, black and white, high and low. Moltmann sees the church at its best when it contradicts the natural groupings of human beings.”¹⁷

The closer we scrutinize the human, societal, even technological aspects of the church growth movement, the more obvious it becomes that we need the Holy Spirit, and only the Holy Spirit, to be the torch bearer of our outreaching endeavors. So long as our pastors look to creativity and packaging as paramount priorities in ministry, the implied and thus learned message in the pew will be that the church’s ultimate value is found in the recipients of the God’s gift, not the inherent Word delivered from our pulpits. Moreover, Bob Wilken explains the near “tail wagging the dog” outcome that is inevitably produced by this approach.

“In a democratized faith, such as we see in the evangelical world, every person’s intuitions are likewise granted equal value... If everyone’s intuitions about God and life stand on the same plane, it is assumed that they are all equally valid, equally true, and equally useful. At the very least, it has become awkward to suggest that the intuitions someone has found to be valid, true, and useful might be nothing of the kind... When the religious audience is thus sovereign, its leadership is appropriately refined... They (the leaders) lead by holding aloft moist fingers to sense the changes in the wind... If the audience is sovereign, then preachers will necessarily avoid drawing precise lines that can separate and offend. In all this they show themselves to be different indeed from the One who embodied what servanthood was intended to be and who never once tailored his teaching to what he judged the popular reception of it would be...”¹⁸

In another source, the role and impact of the preaching ministry of the church and thus the Gospel message it delivers was downplayed in its relevance within the church growth movement. “One could easily get the impression from church growth experts that the pulpit

¹⁷ Ralph H. Elliot, “Dangers of the Church Growth Movement: Is it possible to maintain our identity as the church and to be a ‘successful’ institution at the same time?” *Christian Century* 98 (1981): 799

¹⁸ Bob Wilken, “Subtle Danger of Compromising the Gospel Message in Order to Build Bigger Congregations,” 7-8

plays little or no part in church growth.”¹⁹ John Piper adamantly and articulately sounds the same alarm in his book *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*:

“We pastors are being killed by the professionalizing of the pastoral ministry. The mentality of the professional is not the mentality of the prophet. It is not the mentality of the slave of Christ. Professionalism has nothing to do with the essence and heart of the Christian ministry. The more professional we long to be, the more spiritual death we will leave in our wake. For there is no professional panting after God.”²⁰

Conclusion

The looming question remains. What is one to do if compromise is to be properly aligned in one’s ministry? The first step is to identify the core components of the Gospel. Notwithstanding the rigid posture purposely taken in this paper, there is room for compromise in ministry when dealing with issues outside the clear directives and guiding principles of the Bible. Moreover, there will always be room for honest debate over issues that Scripture has not fully illuminated. But that is where the line is drawn.

The Gospel is a message of absolute truth. To the extent that we can communicate it creatively, broadly and effectively, God will be pleased. But there is no room for compromise when it comes to sharing its divinely inspired content. As individual Christians, we are charged with the responsibility of learning it, living out its message and fellowshiping with God through it daily. Anything less is to compromise our call. On a professional ministry level, Bob Wilkin, whose paper to the Evangelical Theological Society was referenced earlier, encapsulates my opinion in a balanced passage of eloquence and passion, a fitting close to this paper.

“Make the Gospel a non-negotiable in your ministry. Preach the Gospel clearly and often. Call people to faith alone, in Christ alone... Proclaim the message clearly and if people are

¹⁹ Earl V. Comfort, “Is the Pulpit a Factor in Church Growth?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140 (1983):

²⁰ John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers 2001) 2.

offended, so be it. Be willing to resign or be fired over the Gospel issue... The alternative is much worse than unemployment.”²¹

²¹ Bob Wilken, “The Subtle Dangers of Compromising the Gospel Message in Order to Build Bigger Congregations,” 9

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