

*The Necessity of Accommodation
and the Danger of Compromise
in the Life and Ministry of the Church*

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Foreword

James wrote, “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?” (James 4:11–12). When we judge a brother to be doing evil, even in his doing a thing God himself has not disallowed, we are saying that God should have made a law against such a thing. We judge an action or a person as evil where God has put no prohibition. In a sense, we judge God as having inferior moral standards. Should a Christian submit himself to the expectation of another person whose standard of conduct is unbiblically restrictive?

Paul wrote, “If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting

self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” (Col. 2:20–23). We might impose certain codes on ourselves to give an impression, or even feel in conscience, that we are pursuing holiness. But mere rules disconnected from the true source of righteousness—the law of God as seen in the light of Christ’s gospel—have no tendency to sanctify. The Spirit does not give holiness through our man-made punctiliousness but only through the truth He has revealed in the moral law. That alone stands uncontrived, delivered from heaven by the finger of God. The “indulgence of the flesh,” described as “works of the flesh” in Galatians 5:19–21, can only be countered by God’s Spirit making effectual application of true righteousness. This is described in Galatians 5:22–26 as extensions of love, which is a concise summary of the law.

Yet we find Paul also saying, “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is for anyone who thinks it is unclean,” and “Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats” (Rom. 14:14, 20). Add these: “We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves” (Rom. 15:1), and “Eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. . . . Do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience—I do not mean your conscience, but his. . . . If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?” (1 Cor. 10:27–30). Personal

freedom in matters fully consistent with and even expressive of the gospel should be valued. Practicing according to this gospel freedom should cause no assault on personal conscience. Yet the conviction and conscience of another, perhaps uninformed and fearfully scrupulous, may become that which guides our conduct in some situations. Is this a compromise of true biblical spirituality?

How are these ideas of true holiness and legalism, freedom and regulation, liberty and constriction, personal conscience and another's conscience, and spiritual maturity and overly tender compunction to be harmonized with each other? All appear in the biblical record.

This small book by Tom Ascol explores that question in a precise, thorough, and biblically consistent manner. His treatment serves as a model of how Christians should think biblically about every element of discipleship. This issue is vitally important as we navigate the ground between unwarranted compromise, Christian freedom, and loving accommodation. This reading will be an encouragement to spiritual maturity, loving one's neighbor, and self-effacing evangelism.

—Tom J. Nettles

Introduction

The challenge before every generation of Christians is to make the gospel of Jesus Christ known throughout the world. To do this, it is crucial that we understand what the gospel is. “And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?” (1 Cor. 14:8).

Gospel means “good news.” Specifically, it is the news about what God has done in and through Jesus Christ. The gospel is all about Jesus—who He is, what He has done, and why that matters. The news about Jesus is given to us in the Bible. In fact, the revelation of who Jesus is, what He has done, and why that matters is the whole point of the Bible.

That is the message believers are to make known to the whole world. From the first century to the present, the church has had to determine how to do that in ways that are culturally relevant and doctrinally faithful. In other words, the church has always faced the challenge of contextualization. How can our ministry become increasingly sensitive to our culture without selling out the very gospel we hope to make known?

Ours is a day desperately in need of biblical reformation. This is true for our American society in general as well as for local Christian churches in particular. No mildly aware church leader needs to be reminded of the litany of our nation's moral, educational, and governmental failures. What we must be forced to admit, however, is this: the churches of Jesus Christ, despite all the claims of growth and vitality, are making little impact on our society. God's law has been forgotten; His gospel has, for the most part, been lost; and consequently, God Himself has become to many an unknown God. The need for reformation and revival is every bit as great for modern America as it was for sixteenth-century Europe. Consequently, the need is for men who will stand for the cause of God and truth with the same zeal and conviction and wisdom as did Calvin, Luther, Knox, and their fellow reformers.

In this third millennium of the Christian church, American evangelicals have witnessed some stirrings of reformation and renewal. A growing number of (primarily younger) pastors have taken the challenge to reexamine the Scriptures in search of the God-ordained character and content of church life and ministry. Traditional approaches—both ancient and modern—can no longer be trusted simply because they have been handed down from highly esteemed mentors. An honest evaluation of evangelical church life forces every sincere leader to be gravely concerned.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, the Southern Baptist Convention endured a struggle over the

authority and integrity of the Bible. That battle gave rise not only to a renewed commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture but also to a healthy desire to understand more accurately what that Scripture has to say about issues we have long taken for granted. If the Bible is worth fighting over, then certainly it is worthy of a fresh, careful analysis of its doctrines. Such an investigation is leading a growing number of pastors and churches to embrace teachings long neglected or discarded by many late-twentieth-century evangelicals.

Doctrinal recovery is the first stage of biblical reformation. But how does a pastor who has come to understand largely forgotten biblical teachings begin to introduce them to his congregation? How fast should he go? What language should he use? If he doesn't immediately try to convince everyone of everything God has taught him, then isn't he compromising in some way? Is God's truth worth wrecking a church's peace? Can church members who have never heard some of the teachings and principles of God's Word be taught to believe them? Is every belief worth fighting over?

It is impossible to see biblical reformation without some conflict. This is true individually, congregationally, and denominationally. It is hard for people to admit they have been wrong or ignorant or neglectful. When error and ignorance are challenged, there will inevitably be some tension. Some conflict is simply unavoidable. The pastor who is committed to reformation in his life and ministry must be willing to pay this price. Failure at this point results in compromise.

But some of the conflict typically accompanying the work of reformation *is* avoidable. Many of the heartaches congregations have endured during the course of being biblically reformed could have been averted by a judicious application of the scriptural principle of accommodation.

The topic of this little booklet is extremely relevant for any gospel minister who longs to see and is willing to work for genuine reformation in a local church. Accommodation and compromise are vitally important subjects for us to think deeply about in this day and age. Without some serious consideration of this subject, a pastor may find himself pulled in one of two directions. First, because of a fear of compromise, he may move toward an excessively narrow exclusivism. Second, because of a desire to be accommodating, he may drift toward an unprincipled and illegitimately broad openness. Neither is consistent with the balanced approach to which the Bible calls us.

Two prominent lines of admonition in the Bible call us to a study of accommodation and compromise. The first is found in those passages that enjoin us to stand firm for the cause of God and truth, even in the face of severe opposition and great personal loss.

“Buy truth, and do not sell it” (Prov. 23:23). “Contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). We cannot heed these instructions, nor can we be good contenders and fighters for the faith, if we are willing to compromise the teachings of God’s Word. What do these passages say to us if not “Do not compromise”?

Yet other passages direct us to live patiently and peaceably with everyone. “Strive for peace with everyone” (Heb. 12:14). “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18). “Be patient with them all” (1 Thess. 5:14). “Love is patient” (1 Cor. 13:4).

These and similar exhortations cannot be followed if there is an unwillingness to accommodate the imperfections of those around us.

In the final analysis, two important principles may be deduced from the biblical teachings on this issue:

1. Compromise in spiritual matters is never a legitimate option for Christians, much less for gospel ministers.
2. Accommodation in spiritual matters is the ever-present duty of all Christians, especially for gospel ministers.

To avoid compromise and practice accommodation, one must have a clear understanding of both.

Chapter 1

Compromise

The first of these principles is more familiar and readily apparent to Reformed believers than is the second. This is no doubt partly due to the fact that there is no shortage of compromise in nearly every aspect of religious life today. Those who are convinced of reformation Christianity tend to be very sensitive at this point and can usually spot religious compromise a mile away.

What exactly do we mean when we speak of compromise? It can be simply defined as the sacrificing of principles for the sake of gaining what is judged to be a greater good.

Such practice is prevalent in contemporary Christianity—even among evangelicals. We have witnessed the compromise of the Scripture's infallibility, inerrancy, and authority for the sake of appearing intellectually respectable to proponents of historical-critical ideology. We are seeing compromise of the biblically defined male-female role relationships in the face of increasingly militant feminist

theology. Indeed, our generation has been confronted with the compromise of the gospel itself by those who have capitulated to the false standards of successful church growth.

Compromise abounds, and in our culture the gospel minister is tempted by it at nearly every point in the ongoing discharge of his duties. But such temptations are hardly new. The Bible records many examples of God's servants being tempted to sacrifice their principles. The essence of Satan's dealings with our Lord in the wilderness may be seen in these terms. In each of his three attacks, he tempted Jesus to compromise God's eternal plan for the ages.

The temptation to compromise does not always come openly and overtly. Rather, it often confronts us subtly and sometimes incrementally. The encounter between Moses and Pharaoh is very instructive in this. The recorded dialog between the monarch of Egypt and the prophet of God provides us with a great study of a man of God's uncompromising allegiance to the word of God in the face of subtle temptation to do otherwise.

Moses had a commission from God to deliver the word of the Lord to Pharaoh and to lead the children of Israel out of Egyptian slavery. In Exodus 3:18, we have the exact message the prophet was to deliver to Pharaoh: "The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please, let us go three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God."

This message left Pharaoh unimpressed, and he refused the Lord's command to let the Israelites go. Despite Egypt's

rivers running with blood and the land being overrun with frogs and infested with lice, the king of Egypt stubbornly maintained his position. Pharaoh's obstinacy did begin to waver a little after God sent the fourth plague into his kingdom, and he reached a point where he was willing to speak with Moses again.

He offered Moses the first of four concessions. It is the first of four attempts he makes to get Moses to compromise the commission God had given to him.

Exodus 8:25–27 records the exchange that took place:

Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron, and said, "Go, sacrifice to your God within the land." But Moses said, "It would not be right to do so, for the offerings we shall sacrifice to the Lord our God are an abomination to Egyptians. If we sacrifice offerings abominable to the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us? We must go three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the LORD our God as he tells us."

Notice what Pharaoh is doing. He is tempting Moses to compromise God's Word. "Moses, your insistence on having your way about this thing is creating a great deal of hardship and stress in the community and among the very people you are trying to help—not to mention the mental anguish you yourself must be experiencing. This difficult situation in which we find ourselves can all be over if you will bend just a little. You want to lead your people to sacrifice? Great! Do it. Just do it here in Egypt. That's not so terrible, is it? Your God can be worshiped just as easily here as anywhere else, can't He?"

When this approach does not succeed, Pharaoh tries a different tactic in verse 28: “I will let you go to sacrifice to the LORD your God in the wilderness; only you must not go very far away.” In other words, “Okay, you may leave the borders, but you really don’t need to go three days away, do you? Outside the country is outside the country. Just stay close.”

Moses again was not persuaded. God had given very specific instructions that the people were to travel three days beyond Egypt before they offered their sacrifices. Pharaoh’s heart remained hardened. Four plagues later, he tries again to get Moses to compromise. Exodus 10:8–11 tells us how.

So Moses and Aaron were brought again to Pharaoh, and he said to them, “Go, serve the LORD your God. But which ones are to go?” Moses said, “We will go with our young and our old. We will go with our sons and our daughters and with our flocks and our herds, for we must hold a feast to the LORD.” But he said to them, “The LORD be with you if I ever let you and your little ones go! Look, you have some evil purpose in mind. No! Go, the men among you, and serve the LORD, for that is what you are asking.” And they were driven out from Pharaoh’s presence.

Once again, we must not miss what is going on. Pharaoh is lowering his demands. He is offering Moses an alternative, a solution to their problem. The issue is that Pharaoh’s solution would compromise God’s clear directive.

The same kind of effort is made shortly afterward: “Then Pharaoh called to Moses and said, ‘Go, serve the LORD;

your little ones also may go with you; only let your flocks and your herds remain behind” (Ex. 10:24–26).

Once again, Moses refuses. What is going on here? What are we to make of these exchanges?

Here is Moses, preaching a message and taking a stand that made him a troubler in both Israel and Egypt. Everyone is upset with him. The Egyptians are upset because of the terrible plagues they have suffered at his proclamations. The Israelites are mad because this kinsman of theirs, this spokesman for God’s people, has made them a scourge to their taskmasters and has actually made their existence in Egypt more difficult. Because of Moses, they now have to make bricks without the provision of straw.

In the midst of this, Pharaoh offers to give Moses some leeway. As far as negotiation goes, Pharaoh makes some great concessions—from prohibiting any sacrifices to allowing those sacrifices to be offered inside the borders of Egypt to suggesting that they go just a little beyond the border to allowing them to go the whole way yet without their children to finally letting them go if only they will leave their livestock behind.

Why doesn’t Moses go along? Is he being obstinate? Is he unreasonable? Is he some kind of narrow-minded crank? No, he is a man bound by the clear directives of God’s word. He refuses to compromise that word under any threat or enticement. He has been commissioned, and he will not, he cannot, sacrifice the word of God at Pharaoh’s bargaining table. He is no legislator of God’s word. He is a mere

executor of it. Consequently, he has nothing to negotiate when Pharaoh tempts him to compromise.

The Word of God is non-negotiable. It is this conviction that has undergirded those great men of God throughout history. Think of them. Daniel would rather face the lions than compromise divinely revealed prayer to the true God. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would rather burn in Nebuchadnezzar's furnace than compromise their worship to God.

Martin Luther chose to live under the ban and excommunication, as an outlaw all his life, rather than renounce that salvation is by grace through faith. John Bunyan preferred to sit in Bedford's jail instead of living as a freeman who could not preach the gospel. And Charles Spurgeon was willing to be "eaten by the dogs" and leave the fellowship of his denomination for the sake of staying clear of and speaking out against the terrible downgrade in theology during his day.

These men stood firm, and we love them for it. But they also paid a heavy price for their lack of compromise. When the cause of God and truth is at stake, the man of God has a divine commission to stand firm on the Word of God. Regardless of the cost and regardless of the consequences he is not free to compromise.

It is possible to argue that Moses should have gone along with at least the last proposal of Pharaoh. It is, after all, somewhat honorable to make concessions to one in such a noble and prestigious position, especially when doing so will make

life less difficult for the people you serve. Furthermore, had Moses given in to Pharaoh's suggestions, it would have kept the door open to speak further to him about Jehovah at a later date. After all, leaving the cattle behind is just a small thing—and look at how much would have been gained by this tiny concession! On and on we could go.

Does this line of reasoning sound familiar? It is still being used to tempt God's servants to compromise the Word of God. But all these arguments completely miss the most crucial point, which is "What has God said?" If God has spoken, if He has given us orders, if He has clearly revealed His will, then we have no option to back off and compromise. Luther's dictum was not new for him. Neither should we regard it as out of date for us. Our consciences must be captive to the Word of God. And we are never free to compromise that Word, even at the bargaining tables of this world's Pharaohs.

But this does not mean that our conduct is to be governed by a spirit of obstinacy. Neither does it mean that an inability to get along with those who disagree with us is a necessary consequence to an uncompromising commitment to God's Word. Because, while we are never free to compromise, we are at the same time obligated to accommodate.