

WHEN COMPROMISE ENHANCES
Acts 15:1-31 (selected verses)

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on July 21, 2019, the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time,
at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a summer sermon series on the Acts of
the Apostles, entitled "When..."*

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'

And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the Law of Moses.'

The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us....we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.'

The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.

After they finished speaking, James replied, 'My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favourably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets...Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood....'

Then 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....So they were sent off and went down to Antioch. When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. When its members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation.

Prayer: May God grant me to speak with judgment and to have thoughts of what I have received; for God is the guide even of wisdom and the corrector of the wise. For both we and our words are in God's hand... (Wisdom of Solomon 7:15)

I was fortunate to grow up in a household in which I recall virtually no profanity or cursing.

- Occasionally a neighbor at a Memorial Day Barb-B-Q might let something fly, but as a child I was more startled and frightened by the expression of anger than by the words used in such expression.

- The first time I heard a now-famous and commonly used four letter word was in the fourth grade; a hardscrabble class mate used it; I had no idea what it meant but knew from the mood and reaction it was heavy.

But as many words formerly considered off limits in our culture have gained general acceptance or at least have lost their ability to shock, another word which once enjoyed a respectable reputation has become a word of off-limits. That word is *compromise*.

The word comes from the Latin root: *com* meaning “together” and *promise* meaning, well, to promise. A compromise is something that we promise together, less as a couple standing at the altar as representatives of two or more groups who have been in discussion, dissension, disagreement, debate and yet have managed to come to some form of resolution and to a promise into which each is willing to enter. *Compromise*. “A promise *together*.”

I.

As you might imagine, compromise was difficult to come by in the earliest days of Christianity.

- Jesus was Jewish, and by his own admission came to the “lost sheep of the House of Israel,”¹ came “not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it,”² and yet so deeply challenged both the people who had responsibility of interpreting the Law and their interpretations that it only took three years for him to be silenced by death at the hands of religious and civil authorities.
- Likewise, after his death, the two earliest leaders of Christianity were *radicalized converts* from the Judaism he embodied and challenged:
 - Paul, a deadly enforcer of Jewish Law against people who had come to follow the teachings of Christ³
 - And Peter, the leader of Jerusalem Christians who believed the only way to become Christian was to be or become Jewish and adopt and follow all the Jewish laws.⁴

It took a blinding light and voice from heaven to change Paul’s orientation⁵; it took a startling dream – “Rise, Peter, kill and eat” – to change Peter’s.⁶

Even though the early Christian movement was small, the atmosphere surrounding it was loaded, the stakes were high. It was easy for early Christians to divide into two camps and view compromise as a dirty word.

II.

But in the scene in which we read from Acts, a party of *Jewish* Christians – centered in Jerusalem – and ambassadors to *Gentile* Christians – Peter, Paul, Barnabas, Judas and Silas – have come together because Jewish Christians are *concerned* that Gentiles are being admitted into the faith without having to be circumcised

¹ Matthew 10:6, 15:24.

² Matthew 5:17-20.

³ Acts 9:1.

⁴ Acts 15:1-2.

⁵ Acts 9.

⁶ Acts 10, especially vs. 13.

(if they are male) and without having to follow the 612 Laws that grew out of the Ten Commandments and are generally known as the Law of Moses (or Torah).

**

Now I want to pause here and talk about the Law.

We in this sanctuary come out of 2000 years of Christian history in which we are taught and believe we are saved by grace and not by law. We are almost congenitally disposed to and have a very dim view of anything that goes under the title of “religious law.” But we are often ignorant of how spiritual and meaningful obedience to the Law was and is for Jews.

James Kugel, a rabbi and Biblical scholar retired from Harvard, has the best and warmest description of the Law I have seen. Those of you who have taken my Old Testament class may remember me sharing this. (I hope you do!). Here is Kugel’s description of the Law.⁷

In the little encounters of daily life [Kugel writes] – between children and parents, customers and shopkeepers, beggars and almsgivers, natives and foreigners—the Pentateuch [Law] set out the precise form of behavior that God had described. *Do what it said and you were serving God; fail to do so and you were committing a sin.*

- Some of its commandments had the broadest scope:
 - You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin....
 - You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people...
 - You shall love your neighbour as yourself...⁸
- Others told you what to do when you chanced upon a bird’s nest in the road⁹ or specified that you had to be a safety railing on your house.¹⁰

There were rules about vows to God that you might utter in a moment of panic; what God had ordered you to do in case you contracted a then-common skin disease; rules about festivals and pilgrimages and fasting, [bodily] emissions, rules and rules and rules, until it seemed like there was no area of life about which the Torah did not have *something* to say—and that, for later Judaism, was the *beauty* of it.

In doing each thing according to the way that God had prescribed [Kugel continues], a person could, as it were, turn life itself into *a constant act of reaching out to God*. Nothing was done for its own sake; everything was done to serve God. And so, without having to retreat to a monastery or a mountaintop, one could live each minute in a state of holiness and sanctity, creating *a living, breathing connection* between one’s little life on earth and the God in heaven.

What is more beautiful than “a living, breathing connection”? That was Torah, Law, at its best.

⁷ James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 242.

⁸ Leviticus 10:17-20.

⁹ Deuteronomy 22:6.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 22:8.

III.

But since Gentiles had been raised in the Greco-Roman world, the Law of Moses was no more a part of their experience than it is part of ours. We as Christians today tend to live by the motto, as Patrick will preach next week, “For freedom Christ has set us free.”¹¹ It is as if the religious formation of Jews and Gentiles – then and now – has occurred not only in two different cities – Jerusalem and Antioch – but also on two different islands, two different continents, two different planets. As Luke describes in our passage, “there was no small dissension and debate” between these two camps.¹² Sometimes it feels like not even a successful Apollo mission could take us from one planet to the other.

But what we have in our passage for today is a depiction of a council meeting in which those who have been part of the growth of Christianity among Gentiles travel to Jerusalem to try to convince those who are leaders among the Jewish Christians to recognize the Gentiles’ faith even though the Gentile Christians are not being circumcised and are not adopting the 612 laws that constitute the Torah.¹³

We only have the speeches of those who are arguing *for* Gentile inclusion:

- Peter speaks of the work he has seen the Holy Spirit do among the Gentiles.¹⁴
- Barnabas and Paul testify to the “signs and wonders” they have seen God doing among the Gentiles.¹⁵
- James then rises and ties the inclusion of Gentiles back to promises God had made centuries ago, that are found in our present-day Books of Amos and Isaiah, which he quotes.¹⁶

James concludes by doing something we are not supposed to do. He offers up the concept of *compromise*.

My colleague at Georgetown Presbyterian Camille Murray describes the “compromise” James proposes:

The Gentiles will not be asked to follow all of the Law of Moses but they will be asked to adhere to certain essentials: avoiding

- Food associated with ceremonies to other gods
- Sexual immorality
- And food prepared in a certain way.

The Gentile converts will accept ...that life as a Christian will impact their way of life. But they will not have to assimilate completely to a culture that is foreign to them.

The Jewish converts [on the other hand], will not have to say “anything goes”; they will still get to live lives that are marked by their covenant with God. They will also accept that their experience of faith and conversion is not the only way God has been revealed.¹⁷

¹¹ Galatians 5:1.

¹² Acts 15:2.

¹³ Camille Cook Murray, Paper on Acts 15:1-21, Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar, January 2019.

¹⁴ Acts 15:6-11.

¹⁵ Acts 15:12

¹⁶ Amos 9:11-12; Isaiah 45:21.

¹⁷ Murray.

Though the Jerusalem Council is never again referred to in the Bible, it is a compromise that seems to work. Christianity remains strong among people who have been steeped in Judaism; and it spreads beyond its base in Jerusalem into the Greco-Roman world, through the subsequent missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul.

The compromise is successful enough that near the end of his life, Paul or one of his associates writes in Ephesians:

Christ...is our peace; in his flesh he has made *both* groups into one and has broken down *the dividing wall*, that is, the *hostility* between us.¹⁸

In the early 1990s, I taught introductory New Testament to undergraduates at Coe College in Iowa. The best student in the class was Jewish, and she was struggling to understand what she had long experienced as critique and hostility from Christians. When she got to *this* passage she saw – perhaps for the first time – that despite what she had experienced from Christians, the ultimate vision of God in sending Christ was not to erect walls and barriers but to break them down. Even though she did not convert to Christianity, she saw that within it there was a place for her. “The dividing wall of hostility” began to break down, and that brought her *joy*, as well as an A in the class, which she would have gotten anyway, because she was a terrific student.

IV.

I know this is a long story in Acts, and the bulk of this sermon has kept us in the first century. But there are several teachings I derive from this story that I believe can speak to us today – across our own dividing walls of hostility concerning race, religion, country of origin, sexual identity, class, and ideology that seem to add brick after brick to the walls that divide us in our common life. I can do no more than list these teachings in short summary statements:

- Compromise may have become a dirty word in our time, but it is not an “off limits” word.
- Compromise requires change from every side or party involved.
- Compromise rarely involves “total victory” from either party.
- Compromise rarely is perfectly balanced.
- Compromise rarely is pure.
- Compromise is nearly always fragile, and requires much feeding and watering both in its formation and after it is reached
- Compromise must make substantial progress toward what is ultimately just and right to leave any kind of historical mark, and those not experience the fullness of justice must be taken into consideration in the spreading around of the benefits of compromise.
- Compromise most often benefits from:
 - Clarity of thought
 - Clarity of speech
 - Eloquence.

¹⁸ Ephesians 2:14.

- Appeals to the hate and resentment – which Peter and Paul were not shy about doing on other occasions¹⁹ may call attention to the need for compromise and may even create the need for it, but such appeals rarely advance the “consent of the whole” that is so necessary for compromise to last, a consent that happened at the Jerusalem Council and led to hope and joy in Jerusalem and Antioch, on both sides of the dividing wall of hostility.

So in our life together – especially in this country – let’s dust off our dictionaries, open them to the letter C, find the word in bold print – or if we must, let us Google the word “compromise.” Then let us revere its sound and beauty, dance with it as if we are on our first prom.

Compromise is not a word we should forbid our children from saying.

Amen.

© Larry R. Hayward, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria VA

¹⁹ For Peter, see John 21:20-23; for Paul, see Galatians 3:1.