

“Compromise or Accommodation”
Acts 21:15-26
(Preached at Trinity, February 6, 2008)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. After Paul left Ephesus he again set his sights on Jerusalem. Paul felt a driving compulsion to go to Jerusalem. He felt he was under a Divine mandate. He had a single minded passion that would not be sidetracked.
 - A. As we've seen, Paul was continually warned by the brethren not to go.
Acts 21:4 NAU - "After looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem." But Paul would not be swayed.
 - B. In **Verses 10-11** he received a cryptic message from a prophet by the name of Agabus. Agabus took Paul's belt and bound his hands and feet and then said, "This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"
 - C. Again, the brethren begged him not to go.
Acts 21:12 – "And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem.'"
 - D. Paul's answer was resolute
Acts 21:13 NAU - "Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."
2. Finally, Paul arrived in Jerusalem and was received warmly.
Acts 21:17 NAU - "After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly."
3. The day after he arrived Paul went to speak to James and the elders.
 - A. He began to describe to them how God had blessed his ministry with the Gentiles. James and the elders rejoiced and praised God.
 - B. James then began to explain to Paul a serious problem. He reminded Paul of how many thousands of Jews had been converted and how they were zealous of the law. They had remained devoted to the ceremonial aspects of the law such as the feast days, dietary restrictions and ritual vows.
4. There is no indication that they were holding to these practices as being necessary for salvation. There is also no indication that they were still holding to circumcision. This was the issue argued at the Council of Jerusalem in **Acts 15**
5. It was fine with the Jewish Christians for the Gentiles not to practice these things but it was a different matter for Jews to forsake these laws. They could not accept that Paul was teaching Jewish Christians to forsake the law.
Acts 21:21 NAU - "and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs."
6. Keep in mind also that the same Jews who had instigated the problem dealt with at the Jerusalem Council were probably continuing to stir up strife among the Christian Jews.

7. What the leaders of Jerusalem asked Paul to do is very confusing. In **Verses 22-26** we find them asking Paul to submit to the ceremonial law in order to appease these Jewish Christians who had not yet abandoned them.
8. Was Paul compromising truth for expediency? This is an important issue and there isn't uniformity among expositors as to the answer.
- A. James Montgomery Boice for example believes that Paul compromised the faith here. His position is that Paul's trip to Jerusalem was against the will of God and that Paul had made the trip in disobedience. Because he was outside the will of God he got trapped in this compromise.
 "Paul's error was a compromise of the Gospel. The same apostle who had written so many New Testament books, the man who had argued so forcefully that we are saved by Jesus Christ alone was about to go into the Jewish temple and in the presence of the very priests who had crucified the Lord, there participate with others in the sacrifice of an animal that was meant to be an atonement for his sin. That is, he was about to turn his back on the only sufficient sacrifice of Christ."
- B. I believe this is to be rejected for several reasons.
1. Are we to suppose that Paul who never feared the face of any man was about to compromise his faith in fear of these Jews?
 2. Are we to suppose that Paul was about to deny the sufficiency of the atonement of Christ and thus deny the Gospel. Don't forget Paul's words to the Galatians:
Galatians 1:8 – "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed."
 3. Are we to suppose that not only Paul but the entire Church of Jerusalem apostatized from the faith? This was a recommendation from James and the rest of the elders of the church.
 4. If Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, had made such a serious error would not the Holy Spirit have made it clear to us as a warning. The Bible is honest about the weaknesses of men. Nothing is said here.
9. How are we to understand Paul's behavior?
- I. Paul's actions are to be seen in the context of pre-70 a.d.
- A. Paul taught fervently that nothing is to be added to the atonement of Christ
1. Paul saw any attempt of adding to Christ as a perversion of the Gospel. He called it "another gospel"
 2. Any such teaching was seen as anathema.
- B. We have to understand the practices of the early Jewish Christians
1. The temple continued to have significance for them
Acts 2:46-47 NAU - "Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved."
 2. Charles Hodge – ". . . although, the ceremonial law, of which the temple was a part, had been abrogated by the advent and sacrifice of Christ, the apostles considered themselves bound, or at least authorized, to treat it with respect, so long as it was suffered to continue in existence" (Com. Page 94).

3. The Old and New Covenants had an overlap—Not in the work of the atonement but at least in the practice of these Jewish Christians.
Hebrews 8:13 NAU - "When He said, "A new *covenant*," He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear."
4. Instead of the church coming into existence in the void of the destruction of the Old Covenant it came in the midst of it and then God destroyed the Old – finally with the destruction of the temple in 70 a.d.
5. One consequence of this was a continuing state of strife between Jewish and Gentile Christians. This continued until the ceremonies of the Old Covenant were finally and decisively crushed.
6. It is hard for us to identify with this particular period in Church history Paul was merely accommodating these Jewish brothers by making concession in an effort to bring peace.
There is a difference between accommodation and compromise.

II. What is the difference between accommodation and compromise?

- A. We must be cautious concerning our brother's conscience. Sometimes we must make concessions in order to protect the conscience of our brothers.
 1. We have been given great liberty in Christ, but our liberty must never be a cause of stumbling for our brother. We must be willing to give up our liberties for the sake of our brother.
1 Corinthians 8:9-9:1 NAU - "But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? ¹¹ For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. ¹² And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble. "
 2. Not every Christian is at the same level of maturity. God changes our lives by degree
 - a. There are sins that an immature Christian may not know are sinful. He must be taught.
 - b. In addition, however, he may also be thinking that some things are sinful when they are actually not sinful at all.
A newly converted Catholic may still avoid eating meat on Friday
 3. We must not cause our brother to violate his conscience. God commands tolerance until our weaker brother understands his liberty and can use it with a clear conscience.
- B. There are times we will accommodate for the sake of winning someone to Christ
 1. When Paul enlisted Timothy to accompany him on the mission field he circumcised him because he didn't want any cause of offense to the Jews.
Acts 16:1-3 NAU - "Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, ² and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. ³ Paul

wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek."

2. However, when the Jews insisted he circumcise Titus he refused.
Galatians 2:3-5 NAU - "But not even Titus, who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. ⁴ But *it* was because of the false brethren secretly brought in, who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage. ⁵ But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you."
3. We must always be ready to give up our liberties but we must never forsake the Gospel in doing so. But in areas secondary to the Gospel we must learn to be gracious. The Gospel must be protected at all costs.
4. This must be understood clearly by the pragmatists today who water down the gospel under the guise of winning people to Christ.

The end justifies the means" is not an acceptable teaching with the Gospel

- C. For the sake of reaching the lost Gospel, Paul was willing to relinquish all rights
1 Corinthians 9:20-22 NAU - "To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; ²¹ to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. ²² To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some."

1. While with the Gentiles he would ignore the festivals and celebrations and the dietary laws
2. This was the reasoning of the decision of the Jerusalem council. There was a recommendation that they abstain from meat offered to idols – this was a concession for the sake of the Jews.
Acts 15:20 NAU - "but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood."

- D. Nowhere is it suggested that we are permitted to violate the law of God. This would be compromise.
1. Paul was free from the ceremonial law, yet could practice it for the sake of his brothers – this was accommodation.
 2. Paul was not free from the moral law – we are never permitted to enter into sin in order to reach men for Christ or in order to accommodate weaker brothers – this is clear compromise – it is sin.
Example of me violating the Sabbath in order not to offend family
 3. Situational ethics is a dangerous practice. It puts the law of God hostage to our wisdom and desires. God's law must be obeyed.

Conclusion:

1. This was not a compromise of the truth for the sake of expediency. Rather it is an example of Paul sacrificing his freedom for the sake of weaker brothers. If shaving his head meant winning his brothers Paul was willing to make the sacrifice.
2. God has called us to live at peace with one another. He has called us to sacrifice our own rights for the sake of others.

Philippians 2:3-4 – “*Let nothing be done* through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. ⁴ Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.”