

A Puritan view of Compromise and Unity in the Church

Consistent with the high priestly prayer John 17:17, one distinctive of the Puritans was their belief that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was central to unity in the church. They believed that the Christian is sanctified by His truth and that His word is truth. The American church today is indebted to the Puritans, as they introduced the tenets of Reformed theology to her future citizens. However, they did not believe that compromise and reform were achievable at the expense of truth. Their piety was God-centered. To be fair, they were redeemed sinners and pietism had the debatable tendency to venture toward extremes. However, their piety and uncompromising devotion to God did not exist in a vacuum; they were in the midst of spiritual warfare and, to them, truth mattered. There were different convictions among Puritan groups, for example some were politically driven, others theologically driven. However, there are lessons to be learned from the theological Puritans who affirmed the verities of the faith.

Truth remains for the Christian because it is absolute truth. Our truth is the only truth. It is not simply a set of ideals, moral code, or a set of religious ethics. Our truth is found in a person, namely the Lord Jesus Christ who is the only way, truth and life (John 14:6). Nothing is secondary when eternity is at stake, because secondary matters untouched become primary matters of decay.

The year 1662 brought about the Great Ejection, following the Act of Uniformity, whereby several ministers were forced to stop serving as ministers because of their nonconformity to the standards of Anglican worship and polity. To the Puritans who decided to separate, King Henry VIII's previous self-pronounced headship over the church was synonymous with Rome's model of papal headship over the church. Both instances were an affront against the Holy Scripture and the Headship of Christ. Some Puritans were stirred by political convictions, while the pastoral Puritans, in whom we shall place our ultimate focus, were stirred by theological convictions. Although within the confines of modern evangelical Christianity, the headship of Christ is not overtly attacked, it is subtly undermined. The present hour suggests that the truth is assaulted through flirtation with the opponents under the guise of truth, rather than winning such opponents to the truth. The attitude of the day is to forego theological convictions and unite under vestiges of truth, even if errors are present.

Compromise must first be understood as a sin, to appreciate the blessedness of Christian unity. Sin is an eternal offense to God Almighty, so much that He sent His only eternal Son as a sacrifice for hopeless sinners whom He elected unto Salvation. Why is this important to note? Because if Christians are to be watchful that they must not compromise their convictions and be drawn to sin, they must first understand the Bible's warning to abstain from sin. Puritan Ralph Veming wrote:

Abstain not only from apparent evil but from all appearances of evil (1 Thessalonians 5:22). Do not be irreligious. Do not be so irreligious as to go into temptation, when you have been so religious as to pray God not to lead you into temptation. This is mock-prayer. Keep out of harm's way. (Veming, p. 267)

Further, the Puritan view of compromise caused them to guard against, not only their own sins, but the sins of others. "Take heed of being in any way or in degree guilty of other men's sins. Alas, have we not many sins of our own? But will we have other men's sins to answer for? ...Take heed of being an occasion of, a partaker of, or only accessory to other men's sins. God forbids it. (Veming, p. 267) Compromise with sin inevitably leads to forsaking the truth. Forsaking the truth demonstrates despising the truth and to insulting the one who is Truth (John 14:6).

In a sobering warning to consider the consequence of joining rebellious sinners, Venning cautions us, "We may occasion other men's sins and be guilty of their crimes by doing something which we ought not to do; thus acting we further men's sinning." Jeremiah Burroughs succinctly wrote, "It is our wisest thing and safest course to stand at the furthest distance from sin...he that will be so bold as to attempt to dance upon the brink of the pit may find by woeful experience may find that it is a righteous thing with God that he should fall into the pit."(p. 308) Therefore, truth matters and shall remain, but error must be avoided and cast down. The Puritans did not think it a matter of preference to join the enemies of the Gospel. Nor did they believe flirtation with the world would cause the world to respect the Gospel. The compromise in our present age is because holiness is an afterthought. Holiness is deemed restrictive, and truth is tolerated as long as error is minimal.

The Puritans understood that propagation and cooperation with error were sins. Had they remained in the form of Anglicanism, which assaulted the truth, they would have been loyal subjections of the pagan king, but traitors to the King of Kings. They did not compromise for the namesake of academia, respecter of persons, or as a means to 'advance' the gospel. They were afflicted with the cost of salvation for their own souls; therefore they ministered in light of eternity. The theological Puritans trusted the method, Messenger, and message of the biblical Gospel. They possessed a fear of the Lord, which caused them to come out from among those who were adversaries of the blessed Lord Jesus Christ. They separated themselves for the purpose of evangelistic zeal, and godliness. They came out from among the sinners in order to win them.

Satan is the chief minister of ecumenical compromise. He is the foremost opponent of Gospel truth. He is also a deceiver and liar (John 8:44). His aim is subtle poisoning of truth with droplets of error through infiltration, not supernatural displays of announced wickedness. Since this is his nature, he would deceive men to think that the Gospel is advancing while he undermines it. Error cannot be tolerated because it is eloquently packaged. We must be reminded that "false teachers cover and colour their dangerous principles and soul-imposters with very fair

speeches and plausible pretenses, with high notions and gold expressions,” (Brooks, p. 233) Furthermore, they “wrap up their pernicious, soul-killing pills in gold.” (Brooks, p. 233) There is a heightened tendency of compromise and the joining of false teachers with the orthodox in modern ‘evangelicalism’. The truth matters to the extent that if we believe false teachers are as dangerous as they are portrayed in Scripture, and they are, then should we be on guard when choice theologians grant them a platform? The Puritans understood such a bond between light and darkness was engineered by the author of confusion, not the Author and Finisher of our faith. This is why they could not remain in the clutches of an Anglican church that lifted the king to the seat where only Christ should be enthroned.

Four hundred years later in the American church, sinful compromise is tolerated as false teachers join platforms with men of sound faith, the world makes inroads into the church, and the spectacle of entertainment and popularity eclipses faithfulness and truth at all costs. Reluctance to label charlatans as such has left the sheep unprotected. Have we forgotten that Christ has died to not only make us right with God, but to cause us to live rightly before him (Titus 2:11-15)? Have we forgotten that Christ desires a pure bride to be presented to Him? Compromise with sin and error is born from discontentment in the ways and promises of God (Is. 55:8-9). The Puritans extolled the Christian virtue of contentment. Jeremiah Burroughs wrote, “A gracious heart says, ‘God’s ends are my ends and I have denied my own ends.’” (Burroughs, p. 90) “Outward signs of prosperity and pragmatism (i.e. whatever works) were not considered virtuous in the day of the Puritans. It should not be virtuous today. Prosperity and ministry effectiveness should raise greater caution to be uncompromising from inside and outside of the church. Burroughs understood the allure of prosperity and comfort, “The dangers that men in a prosperous position have more than others should be considered by those who are lower,” (Burroughs, p. 103). Prominence is not an excuse for compromise. Effectiveness in ministry is not a reason to allow flirtations with error. As John Owen reminds us, “The aim of evangelical truths is to get the eyes of men off themselves and their own righteousness for present peace and future glory, and on to Christ and his righteousness (Owen, p. 54).

The attraction to join the enemies of the cross instead of winning them to Christ is the popular trend in the present generation. It is often hailed as the ‘gracious’ way. It is quite comfortable to pretend ourselves in a time of peace, while war rages around us. However this compromising is not a new occurrence to the present age. This form of ‘graciousness’ is an idol. Compromise thrives in an environment of worldly tolerance, self-indulgence, self-esteem, theologian worship, and estimating the Gospel as a niche rather than an ultimatum. The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16-18) and the only truth to save sinners from sin and judgment. Every biblical truth is wed to overall Gospel truth. To wander from the larger land, and to become lost within the smaller outposts of the land is to be lost, even if you are oriented to your bearings on the larger land. This is the case with the Gospel. To understand and adhere to the Gospel, while compromising its tenets is to have fallen away from the centrality of the

Gospel. An understanding of the Gospel does not mean the possession of saving faith. Saving faith not only articulates and understands the truth, but also follows and obeys the truth.

Matthew Mead confronts us in the present hour, “There are many who delight in the Word because of the eloquence of the preacher: they delight not so much in the truths delivered, as in the dress in which they are delivered.” (Mead, 50) Namely, there are those who defend compromise because the compromisers speak eloquently. Truth remains, not merely because of the men who proclaim it; rather, because of the One who has revealed the truth to men. If this is our belief concerning the truth, then unity will only be upheld when we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. His voice is heard exclusively through the Scriptures, rightly divided, proclaimed, and applied (Heb. 1:1-2; 2 Tim. 2:15).

Unity of the faith is only achieved through the purity of the church and not merely verbal assent to the Gospel, but saturation in the Gospel. The truth matters as evidenced by the defense of truth, and rebuke of those who go beyond the confines of truth. The Puritans lived the truth, handing the baton of faithfulness to future Christian runners. Today, we are in a unique position to demonstrate that the truth still matters and in His power, truth shall remain.

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