

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Compromise

BEING CONTENT WITH LESS

We have to do with the commandment of God on every ground. For that reason it did not seem correct to speak of *adiaphora* (Chapter Nine). It is certainly true that we may decide freely about many things, but it still remains a freedom in which we ask what God wants of us. It is a Christian freedom, bound to Christ. There are no neutral zones in which we can do as we wish without God's commandment.

After that, the question of a *clash of obligations* came in for closer examination (Chapter Ten). Does God not often make it very difficult for us to obey His commandments by presenting us at the same time with two obligations which preclude one another? We found that man, who fails in many things and stands guilty before God, nonetheless cannot say that he *has to sin* because God places before him a conflict of obligations. Such a conflict does not exist.

In this chapter, a third important matter comes up for discussion. If we have clear insight into God's commandment, it is still not always possible to assert this commandment among men. And in this case that is not because *we ourselves* often remain below par in our obedience to the commandment, but because *others* hinder the effect of the commandment. To what degree must we take that into account and adjust our actions to it? Here we encounter the question of the *compromise*.

The word compromise is derived from the Latin word *compromittere*, which means: to reach a settlement, to come to an agreement. I would define the *matter* of the compromise as follows: The compromise is the necessary acceptance of something less than what one may and must strive for on the basis of God's law.

Here too a few examples can be given:

The Scriptures clearly warn against the evil of divorce. But many people pay no attention to this warning. May a government, which has to deal with the consequences of it, propose legislation in which divorce is made possible in various instances? The Scriptures clearly teach us: "You shall not kill." Even the unborn child must be protected. But if many women ask for abortions and a large portion of the population desires broader, more liberal abortion laws, may a Christian give his support to such proposals?

The Bible is not vague about the duty of loving of our neighbour. That is something far different than discriminating against him. If the Arab countries, for anti-Semitic reasons, demand proof that businessmen from the West are non-Jewish, may one cooperate in this because business must proceed normally? May a consistory or church council, for example, give a certificate of baptism to that end?

During the occupation by the Germans, Dutch Christians had to take a

negative standpoint towards National Socialism, which was anti-Christian by nature. But was it permissible for a *maire* or *burgemeester* to remain in office because he could help good patriotic Dutchmen even while submitting to the occupier?

THE MARKS OF A COMPROMISE

Compromise cannot be avoided as long as we live in this fallen world. Moses permitted divorce on account of the "hardness of heart" of the Israelites, even though it was in conflict with what the Lord had said about man and wife at the creation (Deuteronomy 24:1ff.; Matthew 19:4ff.). Paul indeed prohibited contact with immoral men who had been cut off from the congregation, but not with the immoral of this world in general, nor with greedy people, robbers or idolaters. For, he says, one would need to go out of the world (I Corinthians 5:9ff.). There are such people around, and a Christian has to take that into account.

In a world like this a Christian can often give precious little form to the Gospel in the life of the people. Unfortunately it is sometimes no better in the *church*. That already points to the hardness of heart which Jesus ascertained in *Israel*. How often must we in the church be satisfied with less than what must be striven for on the basis of God's commandment? Take, for example, differences between brethren and sisters which are resolved by just forgetting the matter without any confession of guilt for the damaged relationships. A question is resolved, but the royal way of contrition and confession of guilt is not taken.

On account of the "hardness of heart" a compromise cannot always be avoided. But not every compromise is acceptable. What then are the hallmarks of an acceptable compromise?

In the *first* place there has to be a *conflict*! Not everything called a compromise is really so in the ethical sense of the word. One can call a modern automobile the compromise between the demands of speed and comfort; but nonetheless there is still no ethical conflict. Nor is there conflict, for example, when it concerns scheduling the time which a minister needs for sermon preparation, for pastoral work, for attention to his own family, etc. The difficulties bound up with a proper use of time do not necessarily have the weight of a conflict.

The character of a conflict also excludes the possibility that the issue concerns an opinion instead of a standpoint. A standpoint is something upon which one *stands*, something fundamental that is not easily given up. For that reason I speak about God's commandment in my definition of a compromise. One can come to an agreement in many matters and opinions, even to a painful agreement, without there being the seriousness of a compromise as described above.

In the *second* place, the factor of necessity must be involved. The compromise must be unavoidable. The damage otherwise caused must be greater than that caused by accepting the compromise. William Perkins

warned against trying to obtain the very best thing if the second best might escape us in the process. It is better to be satisfied with the second best than to chase after too much that lies beyond our grasp. He pointed to the good advice of Ecclesiastes: "Be not righteous overmuch" (Ecclesiastes 7:16). Among the examples he also mentioned divorce in Israel. By permitting that, God prevented evil which otherwise could not have been combated. God did not give the law for the letter of divorce in order simply to allow the sin to be committed, or to do away with it completely, but in order to moderate it. Perkins also sees the Christian as placed before the necessity of *mitigating* evil. Faith and a good conscience must be maintained, but, Perkins says, that does not preclude yielding ground to the course of time, just as we also give way to the tide.⁴⁰

In the *third* place, *long-suffering* plays a role. God has patience with this world, and therefore our attitude should reflect that. There is a Latin proverb: *fiat iustitia, pereat mundus* — let justice be done, though the world perish. That is not a Christian proverb, as it witnesses to a zeal without understanding. It reminds one of Jonah who wanted to see Nineveh destroyed (Jonah 4:1ff.), but not of Jonah's God Who spared Nineveh and Who later also had and still has much patience with a godless world (Romans 2:4; 9:22; II Peter 3:9). An uncompromising radicalism fancies itself as already being in the world to come, and forgets that a Christian still has to exercise patience, in love which is patient (I Corinthians 13:4).

In the *fourth* place, there can be no compromise without our *suffering* on account of it. Alas, the only way out is a compromise.⁴¹ But a compromise is never a definitive solution. We have to accept it, but may never resign ourselves to it. We may not easily accept the fact that we were not able to accomplish anything more than the compromise makes possible. We were not able to attain the maximum; but we must not be content with the minimum. And for that reason we must *remain* committed to a society which listens better to God's commandments than the present one.

LIMITATIONS

Nonetheless, there are limitations to a compromise. Often we must be content with *less* than what we may or must strive for on the basis of God's law. But "less" is always better than nothing. Whoever as a Christian just goes with the current and is always afraid of turning the majority against himself does not stick up for the commandment of God. He also reaches no real compromises, but instead only suffers defeats. After all, there are boundaries which may not be crossed. We cannot accept a compromise which would curtail the free profession of our faith. We must obey God more than men (Acts 5:29). Maybe we can save our own life or that of others by obeying men

⁴⁰ William Perkins, *Alle de Werken*, III, 227 (cf. footnote 9).

⁴¹ W.H. Velema, "Grenzen en gestalten van het compromis," in: *Theologia Reformata*, 1968, 159ff.

more than God. Life is a precious thing, for which we must be ready to give up everything, especially if it concerns the life of our neighbour; but it may never be at the cost of the first and great commandment — the love of God.

We can also not agree to a compromise when it means an attack on the life of our neighbour. That is, for example, the case with the legalization of abortion. Here we cannot even open the door just a crack. For a compromise with regard to abortion, *even* if it could reduce the number of abortions, means that we are willing to take the responsibility for a law which would no longer offer any protection to thousands of unborn children. The argument that abortion will still take place even though we declare our opposition to it, and that it would be better to attempt to reduce it somewhat, does not work. *Here* we cannot select, so that some are sacrificed in order to save others.

The difference with a law for divorce is quite evident. In order to oppose lawlessness among men, intervention by means of regulations is necessary to restrain the evil of divorce as much as possible. The government does not thereby infringe upon the life of its subjects. When people end a marriage on their own responsibility and a government intervenes to regulate this, that is something other than when this government opens the legal possibility of ending the life of helpless people.

A limit has also been reached when we notice that it is only possible to take steps backwards and no longer possible to move in a better direction. At this juncture, the example of the *maire* or *burgemeester* during the occupation springs to mind. He was probably actuated by good intentions, but became so bound up in the evil of collaboration that he should no longer have remained in office. A forceful decision is called for in such circumstances, because what is evil will overgrow what is good.

Sometimes we must also dare to say no, while we can be accused of inconsistency. Rejecting the compromise then bears the characteristics of a *signal*. That can be illustrated with the example of the proof that someone is not Jewish. Discrimination takes place in any number of ways. Whoever intends to attack all of this at the same time (in so far as he is informed about the countless *varieties* of discrimination!) acts foolishly. But nonetheless it can still be necessary to give signals and, in particular cases, to denounce the evil of discrimination. Such a signal is, among others, the refusal of consistories, church councils and other official bodies to provide such evidence which would meet the desires of anti-Semitic feelings.

DOES COMPROMISE INVOLVE GUILT?

Some people maintain that each compromise makes us guilty. Now in many cases that can be so, because we do not sufficiently stand up for God's honour and the good of our neighbour. But does *each* compromise make us guilty? If that were the case, then we would have to dare to say that Moses sinned by declaring a letter of divorce to be permissible. But he acted in the service of God. When God allows something and we follow His path, are we then sinning?

There is a difference between the disadvantageous and the sinful. Undoubtedly there are disadvantages connected with every compromise. After all, we have to be content with less than what we ought to desire on the basis of God's commandment. That is a disadvantageous matter. It must grieve us that a compromise is necessary. We too, together with others, are guilty of the fact that it has to happen in the world in this way. But that does not yet mean that each compromise also compromises us. As long as God gives us a mandate in this world, there will be Josephs and Daniels, in surroundings hostile to Him. Without overestimating their position, they will have to accept less than what they would desire, with all the disadvantages for their surroundings and for themselves. But do they then live in an attitude of compromise which must be termed sinful?

It is true that there are compromises which are unthinkable without guilt. How striking is what Naaman says, who declares after his healing that he will not offer burnt offerings or sacrifices to any other god than the Lord. But he returns to his pagan land with its god Rimmon. And when he must support the King of Aram in the temple of Rimmon there, he will also have to bow before this god! For that reason he asks forgiveness of the Lord through Elisha (II Kings 5:18ff.). Elisha answers: "Go in peace" (vs. 19).

There are different lines of thought concerning these words. Some feel that Elisha allowed the request and guaranteed God's forgiveness for Naaman. Naaman would not have to put his position and life at stake on account of service to Israel's God. Others judge with more reservation. Elisha did not indicate his approval, but rather commended Naaman to the further guidance of the Lord and His grace.