

Compromise, Choice, Calling

The reflection on Christians in the workplace has been focused on the meaning of work in Hong Kong in recent years. Yet there is no point to prolong this discussion because those who could understand have already accepted this claim, while those who couldn't will not be convinced by general discussion. After all, it is a matter of worldview, which is hard to change. Furthermore, as what I have pointed out, those who accept a holistic worldview can still have some strong reasons to think that the meaning of work is meager, insufficient to motivate them to work wholeheartedly. In view of this, I suggest we change to a topic which is more fruitful. Since we are concerned with the life in the workplace, which inevitably involves a lot of dos and don'ts, let's talk about business ethics. This is, I think, the more realistic aspect of Christian life in the workplace. And one of the thorny issues in business ethics is compromise.

A Choice Is Essentially a Compromise

The word "compromise" is somewhat derogative. "Expedience" or "trade-off" may sound better. Yet the slightly negative connotation of "compromise" is good to subvert our usual understanding. I take "compromise" to be "giving up of a value in order to pursue another." It is a kind of trade-off. The concept of opportunity cost in economics explains it clearly. When I choose to work for Company A after graduation, the opportunity cost of this is the best opportunity foregone. Suppose, apart from Company A, there were Companies B, C, and D for me to choose, too. And Company C is the best with respect to the overall consideration of salary, prospect of promotion, and prospect of that industry, etc. In this way, the opportunity cost of choosing Company A is everything Company C could give me.

This sheds light on the oft-neglected fact that there is cost for all choices. Seldom will we encounter a situation in which we need not sacrifice any value. Since most of our choices imply giving up other values, and there are so many choices every day, life is inevitably full of compromises.

So, the immediate question is what values there are. When we make a decision, is it possible that we need not give up any single value? If values are confined in a very small set, say

"work is meaningless; it is good only to spread the gospel"

or

"if your work makes you unable to attend the church gathering, find a new one", indeed there is no compromise at all. The only conflict of values may be in choosing whom to tell the gospel to and which church to go to.

Let's think about a very religious auditor who would like to work in a conscientious (thus usually more time-consuming) way, and to devote all the leisure time to cultivate loving relation with children. She therefore is too tired to go to the fellowship gatherings. Is it fair to comment that she is not serious in going to church? I don't think so. This comment is essentially a denial of the meaning of her work, which is roughly endorsed by Christianity, and her vocation as a mother. This is not a matter of lack of moral courage or lack of spiritual strength. Quite the contrary, if she honestly and correctly chooses among the three values, the pursuit of the aggregate of which she obviously cannot afford, and if she takes full responsibility of what she has given a lower priority, what she has done should be appreciated, is good, and pleasing in the sight of God. The restricted set of values is the very reason for some disappointing and damaging messages in the church.

Since compromises come with most choices and decisions, they are no longer privilege to Christians in the workplace. Decisions for "religious matters" can also imply compromise. Having been helping in a youth fellowship for many years, recently Peter found that the church is desperately in need of a deacon. He then decided to be a deacon and stopped serving in that fellowship. In doing so, he has given up the value of helping the teenagers to know Jesus Christ, and, due to the heavier workload of a deacon, he cannot spend as much time with his family as before. This is a compromise, a trade-off. Despite what you may well say, that "God will surely call somebody to help in the youth fellowship," "this is a good re-allocation of human resource," "the will of God is always the best"..., it is nevertheless a decision to give up some values. At least in the sense of Peter's feeling and experience, it is too real to deny.

Three Possible Misunderstandings

Some may object that the Bible asks us to uphold all truth, and this is unconditional. This claim reflects only that the opponents are completely unaware of the inevitability of compromise, or that they have few values in mind.

Some may be so bold to bite the bullet, confidently quoting the Bible that "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." (I Cor 10:13, NIV) First, it is not clear whether "compromise" is a kind of "temptation". It is the burden of the opponents to show that God does not allow us to have compromise in this realistic and finite world. Much worse, what Paul means here does not match what they expect. Paul's world is no Utopian at all. In the same book, Paul says, "I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people - not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, ... In that case you would have to leave this world." (I Cor 6:9-10, NIV) To Paul, one should accept that there are limitations in this world, including not being a perfectionist. It seems to me, rather, that I Corinthians is the very book that shows in the clearest way Paul's expedience in handling issues in Christian life. It is so even in the issue of love between a believer and a non-believer. (Cf. "Love and Marriage between a Believer and a Non-believer", to be published, FES Press.)

Another objection is the label that it is a kind of the notorious utilitarian thinking. However, to acknowledge the possibility and necessity of compromise does not imply the denials of grey area and moral dilemma, or that some values are disposable to whatever extent, or that all values can be calculated in the same measure. If this is still a kind of utilitarianism, I would rather say that it is not notorious.

Compromise Leads to a Sense of Helplessness

Since compromise implies giving up some values, the recollection of opportunities and values we chose not to realize in our lives will definitely stir our emotion, leaving us helpless, and even in regrets. This is especially so when the

decision is one that we are acutely aware of its tremendous and far-reaching consequence to the rest of our lives. But sometimes the consequence is so complicated that we can no longer have a grasp of its opportunity cost. It seems that we are only left with risky leaps into uncertainties. In our lives, there are simply too many values (work, pursuits of moral virtues, love, friendship, a fruitful life, concern for the society, the mission of evangelism, etc.) to pursue that we as finite creatures cannot possibly afford a complete and exhaustive realization of them. And there are also too many possible scenarios that we cannot afford in our imaginations, too. Who knows what my life would be had I not decided to study science? Who can tell whether I would meet a girl the memory of whom I will ever miss if I choose to apply for a certain program in a certain university? What guarantees that he is the special one (if any) for her? If I resign and opt for another career path from now on, no one knows whether I will be better off. Who knows whether my life would be more meaningful had I decided to live in another country?

What we humans can do is just to deliberate with our best but finite knowledge, try hard to mitigate the influence of our elusive prejudices, and then leap into uncertainties, entrusting our lives to the everlasting Lord. Likewise, it is of no avail to say that "God's way is the best" because there are always sacrifices of values in every decision, the importance of which can never be fully assessed. Regrets remain.

This may be helpful in explaining some of the causes of the mid-life crisis: the older you are, the more complicated your story will be, and the fewer companions you will have. Life is full of continual trade-offs and pursuits that I finally get insensitive to them, not knowing to whom I should be accountable for anything in my life. Nor am I willing to be accountable for any more. After all, this is not the story that I have been dreaming of. All that I have discovered turn out to be my limitations and weaknesses. Much worse, nobody would like to be bothered to listen to my story, making the greatest decision too light to bear. No wonder the Preacher says, "... the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die! So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind." (Eccl 2:16-17, NIV)

In the post-capitalist society, this fragmented and helpless situation gets more

aggravated. There are more choices, the possible outcomes of which are both greater in number and in amplitude. In the past, scarcely had one who has worked for over ten years ever thought of looking for new jobs. But nowadays, with children in childhood or teenage, middle-age workers are reminded to be prepared to lose their jobs, but without being informed of any alternatives. The less distinct nature of works and companies, the shortened life of job skills, the fluctuations of asset values with the ever raging financial markets, the time-space compression brought about by globalization, all contribute to a life of ever-changing styles and forms. To some, it is a taste of infinity, whereas to many others, it is the only "choice". While the question whether it is good for the world economy remains largely unsettled, certainly our lives have already been broken into pieces and thrown into a very helpless situation.

Choice and the Calling of Life

What then can we say about the guidance of God? First of all, it is important to note that, though it teaches us that God will guide us and we may accept in peace whatever we encounter, Christianity by no means denies the possibility of sighing for the opportunities foregone. Maybe I still think that I was right in having confronted you, broken with you, left the company, or changed the whole career path. But it is also true at the same time that I can regret upon recollecting all these. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who will judge me in that day. (I Cor 4:4-5, NIV) A firm grip while letting it go, this is the wisdom of St. Paul.

Furthermore, if we affirm the calling of God in our lives, there will be a different story. When we are frustrated by the values foregone, God's calling brings order back – when we set the divine vocations central to our lives, we can make the fragments into a whole picture. If you know that you are called to witness the truth in the media, what you have been given up and the effort you have paid are no longer done in vain. Even misunderstandings of other people become insignificant. With the calling of God in mind, we are no longer insensitive to the outcomes of our decisions. The greater number of choices will turn out to be a greater many chances to experience and respond to God. As what Paul says, everything is permissible, but do it all for the glory of God. (I Cor 10:31, NIV)

I believe this is the right track. Of course, there are some crucial issues not yet touched – How can I know what my vocation is? There may be after all theological objections to the possibility of God's calling to a particular person. Does God have a blueprint every step of which we are to follow? (Actually, I don't think so.) Besides, what is the relation of my vocation, if any, and my work? Many say that vocation is not identical to work; it is more than work. So, what exactly is vocation? Does it change over time? Does it matter to the workplace? Or is it irrelevant to our work? Only a book is enough to answer all these questions. (I wish I can write one in future.)

Conclusion

There are too many questions. Let's focus again on the notion of compromise. It is a matter of fact that most of our decision implies values foregone, which is a compromise. What Christian should do is not to evade compromise, but to choose seriously, weighing the pros and cons. This is what a responsible and ethical person should do. However, it is not necessary that we know how to weigh, especially when we are aware of the tremendous and far-reaching consequence of a decision. Therefore, we need not think that regrets for the past is only what the weak would do. Even if we miss the countless values foregone, there is still hope in God. We may hold on to the calling of God, and courageously step on the road ahead.

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