

Learning Compromise Amid Disagreement

The Wired Word for the Week of January 20, 2019

In the News

The political issues involved in the shutdown have been widely reported and argued in news media, and we will not repeat them here. But a few facts are worth mentioning:

- The shutdown began December 22 and is now the longest in U.S. history.
- The shutdown is called "partial" because back in September, Congress passed (and the president signed) full-year appropriations for Congress, the Departments of Veterans' Affairs, Defense, Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education. So those parts of the federal government are fully funded and functioning.
- The political stalemate over the border wall has left the Departments of Homeland Security (which includes the Coast Guard and the Customs and Border Protection Agency, though members of both groups are required to continue working, unpaid), State, Justice, Interior (which includes the national parks), science-related agencies (includes NASA), and the rest of government closed except for essential functions. In some cases, user fees provide partial funding for services.
- The part of government which is shut down is significant. According to one calculation, the shutdown affects about 38 percent of the overall federal workforce, and 60 percent of the workforce with primarily domestic responsibilities.
- Translating percentages to numbers, about 420,000 federal employees deemed essential are working without pay, while another 380,000 have been placed on unpaid leave, or furlough. There have been reports that some managers are using this as an opportunity to reward good workers by keeping them working, knowing that they will eventually get paid, while furloughing the non-productive, who will see a pay cut. Employees do continue to receive medical benefits. In all, the federal government employs about 2.1 million civilian workers.
- Many thousands of contract employees of various federal government agencies have been furloughed, and they won't get back pay when the shutdown ends.
- Many Americans not employed by the federal government are nonetheless indirectly affected by it -- in terms of lost income because of unpaid federal employees not spending for goods and services, and in terms of government services and facilities (such as national parks) not being available to members of the public.
- Many important things are not affected by the shutdown: Medicare, Medicaid and the Health Insurance Marketplace (aka Obamacare), Social Security, disability checks and veterans' benefits, getting a passport and receiving mail (the U.S. Postal Service is an independent agency funded by sales of postage and services, not taxes). The IRS, while continuing to issue refunds, is not conducting audits.

Applying the News Story

The party spirit today may make it impossible for the government shutdown to be ended by compromise. One side or the other may have to yield. Nonetheless, in our relationships with others, including those who share our home, compromise may be exactly what is needed to resolve some disagreements.

And there's nothing un-Christian about compromise per se.

The Big Questions

1. In your relationships with others, when disagreements occur, what conditions need to be present in you for compromise to occur? What conditions need to be present in the other person?
2. How can Christians obey Jesus' command to love one another even when they have passionate and significant disagreements with each other? What specific behaviors should we avoid?
3. At what point, if any, should we take an unyielding stand and refuse to compromise? Who wins in such a case and who gets hurt?
4. To what degree should concern for the common good guide your decisions about when to compromise versus when to refuse to do so? To what degree does a humility which acknowledges, "Perhaps I'm not totally correct" come to bear?
5. In what ways can Christians work together to fix political gridlock and open the public square for thoughtful, considerate, respectful discussion of our nation's critical issues?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Luke 12:58

Thus, when you go with your accuser before a magistrate, on the way make an effort to settle the case, or you may be dragged before the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer throw you in prison. (For context, read 12:57-59.)

Here is Jesus himself urging his hearers to make an attempt to "settle the case" when in a disagreement with someone else. Settling, at least in some cases, may be through compromise, Jesus seems to be saying.

Question: When has a compromise with a friend or loved one been a good solution for both of you? When has it been a mistake? What generalizations, if any, have you taken away from your experience with compromise?

Romans 15:1-3

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." (For context, read 15:1-6.)

At one point in C.S. Lewis' book, *The Screwtape Letters* the demon Wormwood mocks humans, stating that if disagreeing humans would consider the other side of an argument, and out of love (or charity), each tried to defer to the other, then heaven's triumph would be sealed.

Questions: Under what conditions have you deferred to someone who may not have been as strong in the faith as you? When has someone deferred to you for that reason? What might be the result if such treatment was practiced widely in society?

Ephesians 4:31-32

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (For context, read 4:25--5:2.)

These verses suggest that bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, malice and the like are not just things that spring up within us and are inevitable when disagreeing with others. If, as Paul urges, we can put them away from us, that means we have some control over them and can, with effort, tone them down or sublimate them to concern about greater things that we can accomplish jointly with others, even some with whom we disagree.

Questions: In what ways would these verses be good advice for this time in our country? In our own lives? How might we promote such a view?

Responding to the News

This is a good time to think about the hopes and dreams of those who view things differently, and consider where you have common ground. Regarding specific disagreement, ask yourself, "What am I willing to bend on to save the relationship and achieve mutual goals?"

Prayer

Lord, help me to think well, love well, and when it is the best thing, yield well. In Jesus' name. Amen.