

# **Christian Compromises and Faces Financial Disaster**

Beginning as a mechanic's helper in 1921, the young immigrant from Sicily worked hard and saved his money to go into business for himself. His first venture was as a taxi cab driver. He then went into the limousine business followed by the egg business, grocery business, and restaurant business. Along the way, he met Florence and they married. His wife was not fond of cold weather, so Anthony sold his businesses and began researching tomato farming. As a young boy, he had loved gardening and was trained by an old master gardener.

While researching tomato farming in the New York City Library, he noticed that someone had left a book on the table where he was reading. The book was about Jesus Christ. He knew little about Jesus other than that Mary was his mother. So he picked up the book and began to read. Intrigued, he decided to read the Bible. Growing up Catholic, he had very little exposure to the Bible; this was his first time to read the Bible himself. He read for days and he began to understand that God was a personal God who cared about him and wanted to guide and direct his life, and that Jesus is God's Son who came to earth and died for his sins. He accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior. For the first time in his life, Anthony sensed the power and presence of God. From then on, he determined to seek God in everything he did.

After a year in Virginia, Florence and Anthony moved to Florida to farm. Anthony prayed for \$5,000 profit for the first year and it happened. He recognized, however, the rigors and risks of commercial farming—specifically, labor and weather challenges. So he began praying about other business opportunities.

A friend told him that the Floridian, a local cafeteria in Bradenton, Florida, was for sale. The owner had another cafeteria in New York that he wanted to focus on. Anthony visited the cafeteria and spoke with the owner. Soon they struck a deal and Anthony left tomato farming to own and operate a cafeteria.

The cafeteria business presented new challenges. Anthony made improvements to the facility and then thoroughly evaluated the menu. He needed a dependable person to run the kitchen; he contacted his brother, Joe, to solicit his help. The quality of the food was very important to Anthony. "Good" was never enough, he always sought to improve and to achieve excellence. Fresh ingredients for the menu were a priority. His customers validated the quality of

the value proposition of the cafeteria and it soon became very popular. On Sundays, the line of patrons frequently extended out the door and down the street.

Anthony was an entrepreneur. After he conquered the challenge of the Floridian, he looked for the next challenge. In the summer of 1944, he heard that the Terrace Restaurant in Miami, the largest restaurant south of Washington, D.C., was for lease. Soon he made a deal—a ten-year lease. He and his wife moved to Miami and took on the new venture.

For five months, Anthony worked arduously but could not get the restaurant to financially break even, much less show a profit. As 1944 drew to a close, he was running out of capital. He sold the Floridian and virtually all of his assets in a desperate attempt to make the Terrace work. On December 28, he had only a few thousand dollars left. In a few days, he would need more than twenty thousand dollars for payroll and other expenses. He saw no hope going forward, so he asked himself an appropriate question: *How did I get into this predicament?*

Anthony pondered what had happened and realized a difference in this venture. In the past he had always been true to his convictions, but this time he had compromised. He had a personal conviction that he was not to serve alcoholic beverages. However, his friends told him that the restaurant would not work unless he did. Capitulating to their advice, he agreed to serve alcohol. Deep down, he knew that the Lord was not pleased and became convinced that his compromise had doomed the venture.

Interestingly, Anthony had a view of Christianity that is somewhat uncommon today. He viewed Christianity as permeating everything he did in life—and his work was no different. Every morning Anthony began his day in prayer and Bible study, seeking the Lord's will for his life, marriage, and business. He viewed the Bible as a handbook for life, including work. His love for the Lord overflowed into study and teaching of the Bible. His encounter with God in the New York City Library left him with a profound sense of God's personal presence. Anthony routinely sought the Lord's guidance on business conundrums. He continually asked himself if what he was doing was honoring God.

Today most Christians view work largely as a necessary evil. They believe that God does not really value work in the physical realm; most believe that the purpose of work is mainly to make money to earn a living and to support good Christian causes. At best, Christianity in the

workplace is about evangelism and ethics. There is little sense of divine dignity and purpose in work outside of vocational Christian callings.

In a recent meeting I became vividly aware of this view of work by American Christians. There were thirty to forty people in the room from a variety of churches in the area. Approximately twenty different churches were represented. The topic of discussion was Christianity in the workplace. A question was posed regarding how many churches provide workplace training from a biblical perspective. Much to my chagrin, there was only one church that was doing anything to train people in a biblical theology of work. This experience illustrates the low view of work held by American Christianity today and is in stark contrast to Anthony's view.

Anthony viewed work as a divine activity, a way to worship and honor God by working with people to provide excellent products that would be a blessing to others. Work was much more than evangelism and ethics. It was a place to encounter God, to hear God, and to obey God. It was a place of personal sanctification as God used workplace situations to reveal and eradicate sin in Anthony's life.

Such revelation drove Anthony to his knees in repentance in December of 1944 as he faced the consequences of compromise. He knew that whatever is not of faith is sin.<sup>1</sup> When he bought the Terrace Restaurant, he was convicted that he should not serve alcohol, but he listened to his friends and compromised his convictions. Now he knew that the Lord was dealing sternly with him and that he could not blame anyone else. Anthony was not given to blame casting; he was a man of deep conviction who knew that he alone made the decision to violate his own convictions.

So what was he to do now? Deep down, he knew there was only one thing to do—repent. So he got on his knees and earnestly repented.

Anthony's situation pictures the truth that physical reality is simply a manifestation of spiritual reality. In other words, the root of physical existence is spiritual. Anthony's problem was not a money problem; it was the spiritual reality of compromise. Money was simply the vehicle in the physical world that manifested the existence of the spiritual problem.

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1. Romans 14:23

That night, after his time of repentance before God, he went to work as usual. Mr. E. M. Loew (of Loews Theaters) came in and asked to visit with Anthony. He suggested to Anthony that he change the theme of the restaurant as a marketing tactic. While they were talking in Anthony's office, the phone rang. It was a realtor inquiring if the restaurant was for sale. In just a few days, Anthony sold his restaurant to Lou Walters, father of Barbara Walters. His financial crisis was averted, but more importantly, Anthony learned a powerful lesson—never compromise your principles. He also learned that God is gracious to us and responds to genuine repentance many times with supernatural circumstances. He experienced the reality of the sin-judgment-repentance-restoration cycle that he discovered in his study of Scripture.

After making the deal with Lou Walters, he realized that God had been very gracious to financially restore him. He shared the lessons that he had learned with his wife. The worship of money, which is idolatry, had lured him into disobedience. He knew that God hated idolatry and that he deserved the judgment of God for his idolatry. But he repented and God graciously delivered him from the judgment. He determined to never compromise his principles again.

Anthony, a consummate entrepreneur, did not let much time pass before he was working on his next venture—fruit baskets. Partnering with Florence's niece and nephew who lived in Miami, he began to sell the finest citrus fruit available. His target market was the northeastern United States.

Two years into the business, Anthony realized that he could save money by buying the fruit from the farmers instead of the local grocery stores. Leaving his partner in Miami to handle sales and marketing, he went back to Bradenton and bought produce directly from the farmers. He cut the cost from \$2.50 per box to 50¢, which enabled him to cut his sales price from \$5.50 to \$3.50. Business boomed!

Dealing with farmers, however, had a price. He could not select the fruit that he wanted; he had to buy in bulk. After selecting the best for his gift boxes, he still had good produce that he needed to sell.

Because of his experience in New York, he knew that the upscale restaurants and hotels valued fresh citrus fruit for juices, salads, and desserts. So he began to develop a plan. He could prepare the juice and fruit wedges in Florida and transport them in trucks packed with ice. The

product would be fresh when it arrived in New York. Drawing on old relationships and contacts, he launched his new venture as Fruit Industries, Inc.

Soon he discovered that this business concept was more than a good idea, it was more than a ripe idea—the timing was perfect. Business exploded and the fresh fruit business exceeded the gift box business. After a few years, the gift box business was discontinued so that Anthony could focus on the fruit business. Sales and profits grew exponentially from 1947 to 1963. Then in 1963, Anthony faced another challenge—the failure of the citrus crop.

Unexpected cold weather in the winter of 1963 wiped out the Florida citrus crop, the life blood of Fruit Industries, Inc. The company went into a crisis mode. Some of the executives supported the idea of using concentrate to make fruit juices, but Anthony remembered his experience from the Terrace Restaurant and refused to compromise. Fruit Industries, Inc. was committed to delivering fresh citrus products; there would be no compromise.

Anthony's creative mind went to work evaluating options. He settled on citrus fruit from Mexico. But to produce the freshest product, he had to process the fruit on-site. Acquiring a sea-going barge, he built a production facility on the barge, towed it to Mexico, and set up business. Fresh citrus was processed on the barge and refrigerated for shipment by sea to customers in the northeast. It worked! The citrus arrived in New York fresh. Anthony's creative and ingenious idea saved the company and maintained the high quality value proposition that had become the standard of Fruit Industries, Inc.

Anthony Rossi operated his citrus business for thirty-one years. Along the way, the name was changed to Tropicana and the company became the biggest, most successful citrus business in history. There can be little doubt that Anthony's unrelenting and uncompromising commitment to God was a key to the company's success.

Anthony's philosophy, values, and principles shaped and guided the company. In 1980 he gave the commencement address at the University of Tampa. In this address, Anthony offered insight into the perspective that shaped his life and the Tropicana Company. Some of the key points were:

1. Have a clear purpose or goal.
2. Never compromise.
3. Be strong, don't be discouraged.

4. Never be satisfied, always seek to improve.
5. Use your common sense.
6. Don't look back, keep looking forward.
7. Take care of those working with you and for you. Work with them to solve problems.
8. Be honest.
9. It is not how much knowledge we acquire, but the wisdom to use the knowledge that counts.
10. Above all else, listen to God. Have faith in God. Let Him guide you. Discover how God is moving and move with Him.

After selling Tropicana to Beatrice Foods in 1978, Anthony entered into a new phase of life. Having long been interested in missions, he was led to bless retired missionaries and so he established and funded Aurora Ministries. The ministry built the Bradenton Missionary Village and, partnering with a trusted relative, engaged in providing audio recordings of the Bible for the blind.

Anthony was active until his death in 1993, his faith guiding and shaping every aspect of his life. He was a man who lived what he believed. Among many important lessons, he learned to never compromise his convictions. His life and business truly glorified God and are worthy of esteem and honor by all who call upon the name of Christ as Lord and Savior. There is little doubt that when Anthony entered into the Lord's presence that he heard the words "Well done, good and faithful servant!"<sup>2</sup>

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