

Protagonist Corner

A Healthy Tension: Reflections on Life in a Union Congregation

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“Relax and feel good all over,” the ad for the exercise book read. Another proclaimed, “When simple nervous tension keeps you awake, take Compoz . . . sleep relaxed, wake refreshed.”

As I flipped through the pages of the magazine, it suddenly dawned on me in one advertisement after another that “tension” is a dirty word, and the relief of tension a marketable commodity which produces big dollars. About the same time, my oldest was practicing her violin. It also dawned on me that a little *more* tension on one of the strings would have been helpful and would have produced in me no little gratitude!

Are there “good” tensions and “bad” tensions? Are some tensions healthy and others unhealthy? And if so, what is the difference between them?

The more I thought about it, the more obvious it became that, although some tensions are clearly bad, others are not so bad at all and may even be quite necessary. The tension between two warring parties is bad. If peace is to prosper, tension must be relieved. But the tension between a promise and its fulfillment is good. No goal is ever reached without it, for without the energizing sense that where we are is not where we would like to be, motivation is lacking and nothing gets done.

In its original sense, the word “conversation” meant tension. To converse, Webster says, is “to interchange thoughts and opinions.” But among the ancient Greeks a conversation meant the interchange of *converse* or opposing thoughts and opinions. In Plato’s *Dialogues*, for example, one speaker states an opinion and another speaker gives a counter opinion, and it is out of the tension between these two apparently irreconcilable opinions that a conversation is born and learning takes place. According to Plato, true conversation, talk which is more than “chit-chat,” which affords us the opportunity to learn something new, involves us in tension!

The Bible knows something about the value of tension. According to Exodus, the Lord is a gracious God, “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,” but the verse goes on to say that “he will by no means clear the guilty.” The tension between God’s mercy and judgment, God’s love and his wrath, is a real one. If we try to relieve it by emphasizing the love and forgetting the judgment, then love is cheapened and becomes a weak and sentimental thing. If, on the other hand, we emphasize only the judgment, then God becomes a tyrant, and the church, which reflects its Creator, deteriorates into a company of very judgmental persons who are not good news but bad news for the world.

The writings of the Apostle Paul are fraught with tension. More than one commentator has noted that Paul delighted in paradox—in what, on the face of it, appear to be statements that contradict themselves. “You were called to

freedom" he told the Galatians. But in the next breath he counsels, "Through love, be slaves of one another." How is that possible? Or listen to Peter: "Love as free men (and women) . . . but live as slaves of God."

Love *and* judgment. Freedom *and* slavery. Liberty *and* responsibility. Are there not tensions here that are healthy and need to be preserved? Are these not the twin poles of gospel truth, and as we look at them and at our life in the church, what does our life together mean if it is not that, somehow, we have to grasp both poles firmly in our hands, for it is only as we hold fast to both of them that truth is preserved and our churches are nurtured and grow.

As the pastor of a union church which is fully Presbyterian *and* Congregational (UCC) in its polity, I sometimes am asked by colleagues, "Doesn't that create unhealthy tension?" My experience has been exactly the opposite: the built-in tension creates remarkable health. I may be just confused, but I am becoming increasingly convinced that the great barrier today to that oneness which Christ prayed for his church is not, as it once was, the idolatry of our doctrines but the idolatry of politics. Our politics grow out of our theologies. But after awhile they tend to get divorced from our theologies, and when this happens we cease to view them with a critical eye.

The plan of union which serves as the basis for this congregation's creation provides that the church will be *fully* Presbyterian and *fully* United Church of Christ, and, as such, subject to the constitution of more than one denomination. The constitution of the United Church of Christ states that local churches are "autonomous," legally independent, democracies unto themselves. The constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) declares that local congregations are not autonomous, but legally interdependent, connected to one another through a representative democracy and, as such, subject to one another through the larger whole.

I can assure you—and members of this congregation will attest—that herein lies the subject for a conversation! How does one reconcile "autonomy" with "connectedness"?

I suspect that, apart from Jesus Christ, one never does reconcile them. If I hear the Scriptures aright, it would be a mistake even to try. For what is the tension if it is not the tension of the gospel itself? In Christ's church we are called to freedom. In Christ's church we are called to responsibility. The question we need to keep on asking ourselves is, "Have we kept our ears open to both sides of the conversation?"

This tension is present in our churches and in the life of each member who has heard Christ's word of grace and his word of command. It is good that we should feel it. It is the tension of our own aliveness. It is sent to us by that God "in whose service is perfect freedom and fullness of joy." As with my daughter's violin string, when it is properly tuned, on this tension we can make beautiful music together.