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The Church in Tension —  
In Teaching the Truth  
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# The Church in Tension — In Teaching the Truth

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## I

When we talk about the church in tension, it is likely that each of us has in mind a particular concept based on his own experience of the church's life. We may conceive of tension as basically a matter of conflict causing strain and weakness, or we may see it more as the interplay of isometric forces developing strength and balance. We may regard tension as good or as bad. We may think of it as being inherent in the nature of things, even as a gift of God; or we may think of it as a product entirely of sin and as a symptom of evil and of the breakdown of faith in our midst.

It will be useful therefore to note briefly the varying kinds of tension that may exist in the church. There are, for example, the basic tensions that are given by God Himself. There is the tension that always exists between God's law that slays and His Gospel that makes alive. Without this tension there would be no hope for us whatever. There is also the tension described by St. Paul as the tension between walking by faith and walking by sight, a tension in

which sight is not denied but rather transcended by faith (see Rom. 4:19). Then there is the tension between freedom and servanthood, a tension which was given its classic expression in Luther's statement that the Christian is a free man and subject to no one while at the same time he is a servant and subject to everyone.

These tensions are fundamental to our Christian existence as individuals and as church. They are tensions created by God Himself, and not until the consummation in glory will we be without them. Moreover, these tensions are built into the very essence and pattern of the church's life; to try to escape them is to try to escape God's own design and call. It is God Himself who, paradoxically, tells His people: "I will not forgive your sins" (Joshua 24:19); but also: "I will remember your sin no more" (Jer. 31:34). It is God Himself who calls each one of us to be simultaneously free, totally free, and yet servant, totally servant. And it is almost inevitable that the man outside the church finds this kind of tension scandalous. He finds it difficult to tolerate the thought that a man should be both free and servant. Such a notion, he believes, must almost inevitably give rise to inconsistencies and incongruities in both private life and church life. Either free or slave, either faith or sight, either Law or Gospel, is the only comfortable solution that he can see. But the Christian can only answer that such tension-destroying solution is no solution at all;

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in these cases it must always be both-and: both Law and Gospel, both faith and sight, both freedom and servanthood. In other words, tension in the church is not in itself bad. It is indeed, in a certain sense, necessary. It is not to be escaped, but it is to be accepted with the knowledge given only by faith that the resolution of such tension is found in Christ.

But there are also other kinds of tension at work in the church. There is the tension, for example, between legalism, which seeks always to compel and to force obedience, sanctification, and orthodoxy, and antinomianism, which rejects any and every function of the Law in the Christian realm. Again, there is the tension between the old aeon and the new aeon, or to put it differently, between the old Adam and the new man, or as St. Paul often states it, between the flesh and the Spirit. This tension is given us by the double fact that we are at one and the same time both sinners and sinful and yet justified and holy. This is a tension that we cannot escape. We live day by day in that tension in which we strive to live according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh; and to produce His fruits and not the works of Satan. This daily striving is accomplished in no other way than, as Luther says, by daily contrition and repentance; by daily drowning the old man with all his evil lusts so that again a new man can daily come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever. We should not be shocked or dismayed, therefore, if we see the evidence of this tension on every hand also in the empirical church. For this is precisely the way in which the Church Militant must carry on from day to day and from generation to generation —

under the cross and sustained only by the means of God's grace, His forgiving and life-giving Gospel and holy sacraments.

## II

However, the tensions under consideration in this essay are of another kind. They are the tensions that arise from our common frailty and imperfection yet are linked intimately with our common apprehension of the Gospel and our common love for Jesus Christ, our Lord. Our common apprehension of the Gospel and our love for Christ instill in us all a deep concern for the truth. We share with one another a sincere commitment and subjection to God's Word as the Word of truth. We believe and confess with all our hearts that His Word is the truth. Our common concern is that this truth, and nothing else, be truthfully reflected and proclaimed in everything we say in His name and do for His sake. Yet while we remain in this world our frailty and imperfection are such as to raise tensions among us precisely because of this common allegiance to the teaching of the truth. There are, it seems, two primary factors at work here.

One factor is a tendency to substitute a part for the whole in our apprehension and teaching of Biblical truth. Individually we cling, for example, for our personal salvation to the heart of God's truth, namely that "He was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself." But in our frailty and imperfection we sometimes allow our minds and perhaps our hearts to concentrate too exclusively on one or the other aspect of this many-faceted diamond of truth — to the point where in our thought and feeling and speech, if not in our heart of hearts, we tend to substitute this one

facet of the truth for the truth itself. In our proper and wholesome concern for the truth and for its preservation we may fear that it will be lost if due attention is not paid by everyone else to the particular aspect that seems especially important to us. In a sense we may be altogether right. But if we so thump and hammer on this single aspect that all other aspects tend to be crowded out of sight and out of mind, we run the risk of confusing both ourselves and others as to what the Gospel of Jesus Christ really is and how it really works, and then we stand in sore need of correction by our brethren.

The second factor accounting for at least some of the tensions that we experience in the church is a breakdown in communications resulting from our human frailties and imperfections. On our own part we may fail to express ourselves with sufficient clarity, logic, and simplicity. Again, we may fail to understand with adequate breadth and depth of comprehension not only the statements of a brother in Christ but also his motivation. We may fail to appreciate his concern for God's truth that compels him to counter our perhaps one-sided emphasis or that motivates him to overaccent an aspect of the truth of which he fears that we are losing sight.

We may illustrate this briefly by way of example from some of the current discussion in our midst regarding the doctrine of Holy Scripture — although examples could equally well be taken from the fields of social concern, civil rights, interchurch relations, and others besides; in all these areas, too, we must always, in the words of our theme, be about the teaching of the truth.

Surely high on the list of topics relating

to the doctrine of Holy Scripture as it is presently being discussed among us is the matter of the Bible's inerrancy. That God's Word is indeed inerrant is for all of us a corollary of the unarguable premise that God does not lie or deceive or fail to say what He wants to say. This is agreed and axiomatic for us all. There is, however, as everyone must admit, a tension among us despite our agreement, a tension, I submit, that arises in great part at least from the fact that various factors enter into our appreciation of this one truth; and when one factor is emphasized over against another, a polarity of opinion develops that seems to pull us in opposite directions.

On the one hand there is the emphasis that reasons as follows: Since God does not lie, it follows that everything in Scripture that purports to relate facts literally conforms to fact. The operative word here is the word "purports," which may on occasion introduce a begging of the question. This is precisely where the issue often lies: What does the Scripture purport to say in the given instance? We shall look at this point a little more closely later on. For the moment, we return to the emphasis that since God does not lie, everything in Scripture that purports to relate facts literally conforms to fact. Discrepancies, while perhaps acknowledged, are to be regarded in principle as reconcilable if all the necessary information were available to us. Furthermore, to allow even hypothetically the possibility that an apparent narrative statement does not conform to literal fact would, it is argued, make all of Scripture doubtful, including its witness to our Lord's redemptive life and death and resurrection.

This emphasis clearly seeks to protect

the valid Biblical viewpoint that our faith in Jesus Christ is a faith inextricably connected with history, that is, connected with given historical events. Moreover, this emphasis insists on letting God and His Word, not man and his reason, be the judge of all truth. At its best, when properly understood and employed, this emphasis proceeds from the Spirit-worked conviction that Jesus Christ is my Savior and Lord and hence that the Scriptures that bear the primary witness to Him are indeed what in fact they claim to be, the inspired and utterly truthful Word of God. At its worst, that is, when it is improperly understood and employed, this emphasis takes as its starting point *not* the Christ-centered faith of a believer's heart but the bald proposition that the Bible is inspired and inerrant, and it argues that for this reason every rational man is obliged to acknowledge the truth, or as some would prefer, the "facticity" of whatever is found in it, including, of course, its witness to Jesus.

Now when Biblical inerrancy is looked at and presented from this latter standpoint, we should not be surprised to hear other voices in the church, voices of our brethren, reminding us of some other considerations that to them seem to require a special emphasis in this connection. This emphasis would insist equally that God does not lie and that therefore in His Word He speaks His inerrant truth. But it would go on to point out that to use the Bible's inspiration as the logical and theological starting point for bringing someone else to an acceptance of the Gospel is a subtle form of legalism. At the same time it would urge that the church has neither the right nor the duty to prejudice what it is

that Scriptures purport to relate, in other words, what it is that God is in fact saying to us through His Word. Neither the Christian nor the church should presume to dictate to the Holy Spirit what kind of language vehicle, what kind of literary mode, He may use in order to convey His truth to us. If, for example, He has chosen to employ apparently discrepant accounts of the same event, these accounts should be taken just as God has been pleased to give them to us by the hand of His human instruments, the inspired writers. If the accounts disagree in detail, the disagreements must be allowed to stand without denial of what is obvious to every reader. Rather than expend time and ingenuity in fanciful efforts at reconciliation, we should focus our attention on the total Word of mercy or of judgment that God is speaking to us through the text. Similarly, if God has chosen to tell of His historical acts among men through a mode of writing history that may possibly differ from what we might expect or wish, that is entirely within His freedom; and it is for us to hear His truth however He has willed to present it.

At its best, this view, which, like the first, proceeds from the Spirit-worked conviction that Jesus is Savior and Lord and hence that the Scriptures, which bear the primary witness to Him, are in fact the very Word of God, seeks because of this very conviction to let the text of God's Word speak on its own terms and in its own terms rather than to impose our own literary or philosophical presuppositions on the text. At its worst it begins and continues to operate with the supposition that human reason can sit in judgment upon the essential truthfulness, historical as well as

theological, of the Scriptures and hence can also choose what and what not to believe.

Now such tension as arises when these two emphases are given voice at the same time in different quarters of the church may be either wholesome and fruitful or deadly and destructive. The tension will be wholesome and fruitful if it compels brethren to listen to one another, to allow themselves to be corrected where necessary, or to have their insight and understanding broadened and deepened. But it will be deadly and destructive if it drives brethren to close their ears to one another, to group themselves into hostile camps and parties, and to distort what our confessions call "the mutual consolation and conversation of brethren" into vicious internecine warfare with wild shouting of slogans, catchwords, and insulting epithets.

### III

At this point the question naturally arises if the truth itself does not demand open and vigorous opposition to all false or erroneous teaching, and if we are not committed both by our faith in Jesus Christ and by our sworn loyalty to Scripture and the Lutheran symbols to protest publicly against any public deviation from the doctrine of the Gospel as this is given to us by Scripture. To this question our only answer must be a hearty affirmative. But such an affirmative answer, however sincere, by no means gives us license to confuse churchly tradition with Biblical teaching. Nor does it permit us to elevate our private opinions to normative doctrine and then proceed to hereticize any brother who may call tradition into question or fail to share our opinion, no matter how widely it is held. Here the words of the Formula of Concord are most relevant: "We shall

at all times make a sharp distinction between needless and unprofitable contentions (which, since they destroy rather than edify, should never be allowed to disturb the church) and necessary controversy (dissension concerning articles of the Creed or the chief parts of our Christian doctrine, when the contrary error must be refuted in order to preserve the truth)" (FC SD, Summary Formulation, 15). We may recall also what the Apology says: "There are also many weak people in the church who build on this foundation perishing structures of stubble, that is, unprofitable opinions. But because they do not overthrow the foundation, these are forgiven them or even corrected. The writings of the holy fathers show that even they sometimes built stubble on the foundation but that this did not overthrow their faith" (Ap VII 20 f.). Commenting on this statement of Melancthon, Herbert Bouman remarks (in an unpublished essay): "This refers not only to the so-called 'weak people' who perhaps do not know any better but also to the 'holy fathers,' who were not 'weak' but great and esteemed teachers of the church, such as Augustine, Cyprian, Ambrose, etc. And we may extend the list to include 'the holy fathers' of the Lutheran Church."

But granting all this, as grant it we must if we subscribe to the Lutheran symbols, we see here another factor that makes for tension in the church, namely the fact that despite our common allegiance to Holy Scripture as the source and norm of all doctrine the question "What is doctrine?" finds its answer given with varying emphases among us.

On the one hand, it is held that whatever Scripture says is doctrine, for the

reason that all Scripture is given to make us "wise unto salvation" and, furthermore, because in all its parts and words it is the very Word of God.

The positive value and validity of this emphasis is its insistence that to God alone belongs the prerogative of telling man what he needs to know for salvation, that He has in fact done so in the Holy Scriptures, and that the believer can and should rely with fullest confidence on the Scriptural word by which God addresses him. Negatively, this emphasis rightly rules out any human attempt to pit Scripture against Scripture, any human reluctance to hear the voice of God in every part of Scripture, any human effort to impose external criteria on Scripture.

But valuable and valid though this emphasis is, it does not say everything that needs to be said on the matter. Specifically, though it is perfectly true that whatever God says through Scripture is "profitable for doctrine," not every statement that we find in Scripture is by itself doctrine. Here we may make what may seem to be an overly simple observation: Not everything in Scripture is in the form of statements. There are also questions—questions, for example, like those which the psalmist asks: "How long wilt Thou forget me, O Lord? Forever? How long wilt Thou hide Thy face from me?" (Ps. 13:1). There are exclamations, for instance: "O my God, my soul is cast down within me" (Ps. 42:6). There are commands, for example: "If the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn" (1 Cor. 11:6). There are apostrophes to nature and to the non-human creature world, such as: "Praise the Lord from the earth, ye dragons and all deeps." (Ps. 148:7)

And so we could continue. Now the obvious answer to the question if such utterances as these are doctrines is: of course not. What God is saying to us through such utterances and what is therefore doctrine needs to be understood according to the total context of which these utterances are only a part. But this is precisely the point—and not only with regard to questions, exclamations, and so on, but also with regard to simple statements. What God wants to say and what He in fact does say to us is not to be found by atomizing Scripture, that is, by breaking Scripture down into unrelated bits and pieces and taking individual sentences or verses or even chapters by themselves alone. We do not do that with the words and writings of our fellowmen, much less may we do so with the Holy Scriptures. We must listen rather to each individual word or sentence or chapter in its relationship to the whole of which it is an integral part. And we must listen to the whole in the light of the individual parts that together compose it.

Practically speaking, this means among other things that a Bible reader will consciously or unconsciously take into consideration the literary nature of the specific text that he is studying. For it is simply a fact of human communication that one's understanding of another man's message, whether oral or written, is to a greater or lesser degree contingent on recognizing the kind of communication pattern which the other is using. Our newspapers give us many examples of this. Headlines, editorials, cartoons, sports page, market reports, advertisements—a daily paper features all these differing literary forms, as well as straightforward news items. Each form or

category delivers a message but delivers it in its own special way; and the reader tunes in, as it were, on the appropriate literary wave length in order to receive the message as clearly as possible. Perhaps I can illustrate this very briefly. Consider the following selections from the pages of a daily newspaper:

Hitler Invades Poland.

This Sleek Opera Pump Goes Everywhere. For a High Stepping Holiday You'll Love Our Fashion-value Classic with Jet-molded Patent Uppers.

Hogs 8500; uneven; butchers 25 to fully 50 higher; cows slow, sheep 500, fairly active; lambs and ewes steady to weak; good to prime lambs 16.50—19.50.

Mantle wore the horsecollar again in the nightcap.

It is plain, I think, that apart from their context, apart from the pattern and literary conventions according to which they are being used, these words have no inherent meaning. They are signals, and as signals they need to be interpreted. And this is true of all language, which, as someone has said, is simply patterned sound, contextualized.

But, we may ask, does this kind of principle apply also to Scripture? One example may suffice to show that it does. Since grade school days we have all been aware of a basic difference between prose and poetry, not only in structure and style but also often in purpose and point. It was this that Archibald MacLeish had in mind when he wrote in *Ars Poetica*: "A poem should not mean / But be." We are also aware that the Scriptures contain a great deal of poetry; in fact, according to some Biblical students, as much as one-third of the entire canon is poetic in form. Now

to state or recognize this fact does not in the slightest depreciate the truth of what God says to us through the poetic portions of His Word. But we "tune in" on His truth expressed poetically somewhat differently from the way we tune in on His truth expressed in prose. More than that, as we study Scripture, we learn that Biblical poetry, or better, Hebrew poetry differs formally in some very important ways from our familiar rhyme and rhythm patterns. One of the most significant points of difference is the Hebrew poet's persistent habit of balancing thought against thought, phrase against phrase, word against word. This balance may be one of equivalence or of contrast or of progression. Time does not permit us to look at more than one simple instance of such poetic writing in the Scriptures, namely Psalm 24:1-3:

The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof,  
the world and those who dwell therein;  
for He has founded it upon the seas  
and established it upon the rivers.  
Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?  
And who shall stand in His holy place?

It is immediately evident that the second line of each verse does not introduce a new thought but rather repeats or echoes in other terms the immediately preceding line. This, of course, is of considerable practical importance for the Biblical interpreter. For instance, in the first verse of Psalm 24, the expressions "earth" and "world" do not designate two different aspects of creation, but rather are two ways of speaking about the totality of creation. Similarly "rivers" and "seas" refer to the same subterranean depths on which the writer conceives the dry land to be established. And in the



third stanza "the hill of the Lord" is in fact "His holy place," namely, the temple in Jerusalem. In other words, it would lead to a misunderstanding of this text if the interpreter were to try to extract an extra or additional meaning out of the second line in each of these verses. It is his recognition, witting or unwitting, of the particular literary nature of the material (in this case its poetic character) that in fact prevents him from making such an exegetical mistake. (The example cited in this paragraph is based on the discussion by Norman K. Gottwald in the article on "Poetry" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*.)

The point of this little digression has not been to emphasize that much of the Bible is poetic—which of course no one would dispute. Nor is it to argue in favor of interpreting as poetry some given passage that once we perhaps understood as prose. The point is rather to underscore the simple fact that the determination or at least recognition of the particular literary form or mode of God's address to us in Scripture is an essential element in our hearing and heeding and proclaiming of His truth.

This is one part of the tension-creating counterbalancing response to the otherwise soundly Christian assertion that whatever Scripture says is doctrine. For as true as this assertion is, it must be balanced by the recognition that in order to listen with reverence to Scripture as the source and norm of doctrine one must first be certain that he has actually heard on its own terms just what it is that God is saying through the specific text that is under consideration. And to such actual hearing of God's Word there necessarily belongs also the appre-

hension, intuitive or deliberate, of the human mode and manner of God's speaking in the Scripture.

This, then, is one part of the counterbalancing response. There is another part, however, that is probably even more important. And that is this. To the question "What is Biblical doctrine?" there can finally and always be only one answer. *The* doctrine of the Bible is the Gospel, which is understood correctly only against the background of God's law. This understanding of Holy Scripture as Gospel, the divine good news that God Himself has set us free from the condemnation and curse of His law, is the understanding that permeates all our Lutheran symbols. It should suffice here to quote only the Apology as witness to this fact:

These are the two chief works of God in men, to terrify and to justify and to quicken the terrified. One or the other of these works is spoken of throughout Scripture. One part is the Law, which reveals, denounces, and condemns sin. The other part is the Gospel, that is, the promise of grace granted in Christ. (Ap XII, 53)

To accept this understanding of Holy Scripture does not of course solve every question of Biblical interpretation. Neither does it mean that the articles of faith can be reduced to a solitary statement about God's redemptive act in Jesus Christ. But it does mean that there is no article of faith that does not stand in direct and integral relation to that Gospel whose heart and core is the justification of the sinner before God by grace for Christ's sake through faith. It also means that Holy Scripture is misunderstood if it is conceived of not only as functioning as Law and Gospel (as Lutherans understand these

terms) but as teaching a great many other things besides. Scripture always functions either as Law or Gospel. There is no third possibility. This is the other side of the coin on whose face we read: "Whatever Scripture says is doctrine."

If we were perfect in our understanding of God's Word, there would of course be no tension between these two affirmations. But tension does arise whenever our understanding of either one is imperfect. Our understanding is imperfect if, on the one hand, we confuse Christian hearts and tyrannize their consciences by compelling them to read Scripture without reference to its own categories of Law and Gospel and hence to treat as independently doctrinal in substance any and every statement, utterance, passage or pericope. Our understanding is no less imperfect if, on the other hand, we make of Law and Gospel nothing more than categories, mere abstract principles, unbound by their Biblical rootage in history and events and by the actual concrete witness of God's inspired writers.

#### IV

We have spoken so far of tensions in the church that in themselves are not inherently bad even though they arise in part from our own frailty and imperfection. They are tensions with which we not only can live but from which we can mutually profit. For tension is not always conflict. It can also be that which holds together what otherwise would fly apart. This is the kind of tension that comes when brethren lovingly seek to pull and to hold one another closer to the truth they cherish in common. Without this kind of pulling and tugging we should be in danger not only of letting go of each other but of letting

go of the truth itself. For such tension we can really only thank God and pray that He may use it to keep us close to Him, close to His Word, and close to each other.

But there is also another kind of tension in the church, of which we cannot fail to speak at least a word. It is the kind of tension that is synonymous with discord, alienation, enmity. It is the kind of tension that tears apart, disrupts, divides. It sows dissension and feeds on suspicion. It appeals to fear and nurtures passion. It thrives on slander, calumny, and scandal. It has no champions, only victims; and its sorriest victims are perhaps its own unwitting sponsors. God forgive both us and them for the evil that we speak and do as we are caught in the ugly meshes of tension such as this.

I choose my words with utmost care and deliberation as I say to you before God that it is nothing less than a demonic spectacle we witness and experience when the printed page is dedicated to laying waste the church under the guise of preserving it; to defaming brothers in the name of Christ, our Brother; to twisting truth in the name of the Truth; to shamelessly misusing words in the name of the Word.

This spectacle I say is demonic in the most literal sense of the word. It is a thing of evil, demonic in its inspiration, demonic in its consequences. But what under heaven are we to do in the face of such a spectacle—a spectacle in which we ourselves are involved, everyone of us, one way or another? Here there are no easy answers; nevertheless there are answers, answers given to us by God's own Word.

First, each of us is called to repentance. Individually and corporately, we in our sin are responsible for the foul miasma of evil-

speaking that pollutes our churches and poisons our relations to each other. Each one of us has at one time or another spoken recklessly, written carelessly, listened maliciously, judged uncharitably. For all of this and more besides, the fruit of our sinful nature, we are clearly called to repentance, to honest, painful, utter repentance.

Second, we are called by the same Word of God to rejoice in His forgiveness, His total free and unconditional forgiveness for the sake of Him of whom both psalmist and apostle declare: "The reproaches of those who reproached Thee fell on Me." (Rom. 15:3; Ps. 69:9)

Third, in the daily personal renewal of our baptismal covenant we are called to abjure and renounce the devil and all his wicked works, including in particular this specific wicked work of his — this ugly prostitution of tongue and pen to the service of vilification and abuse. Such renunciation means that we refuse in the name

of Christ to lend any aid whatever, by mouth or hand or ear, to the propagation and promotion of this infection in our midst.

Finally, we are called in and by the spirit of Christ to forgive as we ourselves are forgiven and to heed the word of Law or Gospel whenever it is spoken to us as we pray it may be heard when we on our part speak it to others. None of this is easy, for it hurts and humbles; indeed, it kills the old man within us. But because it is God's answer to our need, it is possible by His grace. For it is He who makes alive the dead and who calls into being the things that are not as though they were.

That is after all the truth which His church exists to proclaim. Only in that truth whose center is our Lord Christ Himself can we, by faith, find the resolution of those tensions in which we sinners live continually this side of glory.

St. Louis, Mo.