

Good Tensions

Dear Philip,

Monday has always been the worst day of my week. A banner stretched over a church parking lot in Southern California clearly expressed my sentiments: *Revival Nightly, Except Monday.*

Mondays usually seemed filled with stress and problems. The weekly schedule in my first pastorate included spending Mondays calming the *troubled waters* that had risen to the surface on Sundays. One of my goals was to eliminate as many problems and tensions as possible in order that my ministerial voyage would have *smooth sailing*.

However, the harder I tried, and the more the church grew, the rockier the voyage seemed. In fact, sometimes instead of diffusing tensions, I appeared to create them. With greater diversities within the congregation, more tensions developed.

When I analyzed things, I realized either the situation had to change radically or my perspective needed to be altered. My education and experiences to that point had taught me that tensions had no place in a spirit-controlled congregation. Tensions were viewed through a negative filter. Expressions, such as *I have a tension headache*, and *the atmosphere in the room was filled with tension*, colored my perception. I needed a major paradigm shift.

One dictionary definition for tension is *the balancing of forces or elements in opposition*. Another way to express this concept is *the stretching of two opposite forces, while searching for a proper balance*. Illustrations of this process abound in our daily lives.

A tension knob on a sewing machine allows fabric to be stitched evenly. The tension knob on a fishing rod lets you catch fish that are swimming in the opposite direction. Most exercise bikes have a tension adjustment knob which gives the rider the greatest benefit from a workout.

One of the best illustrations of the positive use of tension is a sailboat. Two basic elements provide resistance to a sailboat moving forward—wind and water. Paradoxically, these same elements assist a sailboat in successfully reaching its objective. Eliminate the tension caused by the wind and waves and the sailboat will remain motionless near the shore.

A pastor in the Midwest once wrote to me saying, *I wish I could use the advice you provided about handling tensions creatively, but we don't have any tensions in our church. I wish we had some tensions. At least I'd know we are alive*. Six months later, the pastor wrote again to inform me that the seventy-five year old church had closed its door for the final time. Good tensions, Philip, are actually a sign of life.

I've occasionally heard people say, *I wish we could go back to the New Testament church where they didn't have all this tension*. Anyone who has read the history of the early church as recorded in Acts chapters 4 to 15 will realize the many tensions they experienced.

Many of the tensions faced by the early church resulted from opposite forces that were neither good nor bad. Tensions can have several sources. Some are caused by different cultural backgrounds, such as people's views of time and priorities. Other tensions are generational, arising from different perspectives on finances or life styles. Another tension most churches encounter originates from different styles of leadership. Some leaders are more goal-oriented, such as the Apostle Paul, while others like Barnabas are more people-oriented.

Differences in doctrinal beliefs, such as the role of women in leadership and the use of gifts, are some of the tensions churches face. And most churches have experienced the tension that develops around worship styles.

How do you think we should respond to these tensions, Phil? What's your opinion?

Some churches attempt to eliminate one view or the other. However, what subsequently happens is the marginalization of part of the congregation. A better approach is to realize the power of the *And*. When we get to the place in our thinking when it has to be this or that, we usually have eliminated the blessings of paradox.

Therefore we should look for the power of the *and* regarding objectives, methods, goals and values. Instead of trying to eliminate tensions, effort should be exerted to adjust them. Try looking for ways for these tensions to actually facilitate the purpose and goals of the congregation.

I caution you, however, to watch out for bad tension in ministry as well. Just as a sailor must face destructive storms, a minister will encounter tensions that cannot be adjusted. Tensions that are sinful and/or divert you from achieving the goals God has helped you set require radical surgery.

Sometimes you will need to assume the role of *conflict manager*. This will require wisdom, discernment and skill. If you learn, however, to be a tension adjuster, it is surprising how many conflicts can be avoided. You can't avoid the winds and waves, but as Edward Gibbon says, *The winds and the waves are always on the side of the ablest navigator*.

The following ad appeared in a Kansas newspaper: *We will oil your sewing machine and adjust the tension in your home for \$1.00*. Response to the ad was overwhelming!

No matter how hard we try, we cannot have a tension-free home or a tension-free church. The secret is to learn to adjust tension, not to eliminate it.

Your friend in Christ,

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*Keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist,
discharge all the duties of your ministry.*

2 Timothy 4:5