

The Ever-Present Tension

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The Christian life is not a walk in the park. It is a blessed life and a rewarding life, but it is also a life characterized by an ever-present tension. Advertising mavens, medical personnel and even television gurus tell us that tension is a bad thing. In many circumstances tension can be a negative, but tension in life is as necessary as breathing.

If a young athlete wants to increase strength in a part of the body, weight training is often the answer: Tension. If you have a big exam at school tomorrow, a late night of study may be required: Tension. If you are new to your job, you face long periods of training. Tension: Tension can cause trouble (tension headaches, tension in relationships, etc.) but it is a natural and needed thing.

So it is in the spiritual realm. Indeed, the relationship between the world and the church is a matter best understood as a state of tension. In Romans 12:2 Paul said, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good, and acceptable and perfect (or consummate) will of God." There is an ever-present tension between the church and the world.

This tension between the church and the world is a matter of historical reality. For the earliest years of the church's existence (c.30-312 AD) it was illegal to be a Christian in the Roman Empire. Some emperors stressed this more than others and the persecution was worse in some areas compared to others. Variable intensity aside, the tension between the church and the world was legal and government approved.

After the time of the emperor Constantine, the legal status of the church improved, but in reality the tension became worse. The church made a transition from being officially persecuted to being officially approved. The ranks of Christendom swelled and the recognized church grew to become Biblically unrecognizable. So it is today that most of the world's churches look very little like that which is described in the New Testament.

Today, there is an even greater tension between the world and the church. The world would have the church conform to whatever standards are popular at the moment. Today the trend for many in the Christian world is relativism. Others feel they must follow the dictates of their church or religious leaders. Both of these positions are wrong and they are both a manifestation of the church giving in to the pressure of the world.

We see this having an effect on our own people. I've been informed more than once that "we need to change," the idea being that if we don't become like the more popular churches we will fall behind. This very idea is worldly in that it uses the wrong standard as a template for success. Spiritual success is determined only by one's faithfulness to God's will as revealed in His Word. If we are faithful to God's Word we are spiritually successful even if circumstances cause us to be looked down upon by the world.

The essence of the tension between the church and the world is that the world is earthly, and the church is spiritual. This is not a better-felt-than-told thing. Paul said "Set your affection (mind) on things above, not on things on the earth" (Colossians 3:2). This ever-present tension begins with how we think and is expressed in what we do. It will never go away. We must interact with the world without becoming worldly.

May we let this ever-present tension push us closer to God.....!

PS Again, thanks Bill Irby, for your good teaching by your written lesson.....Bill Richardson