LESSON 12

Its Continuing Problem: Tension

There are some tensions that a Christian should not have, such as those that result from self-centredness, immaturity, instability, and/or a lack of faith in the Lord. These tensions are destructive and self-defeating. In extreme form, they may become neurotic compulsions, culminating in nervous and mental disorders.

In this lesson we shall concentrate on constructive rather than destructive tensions. Constructive tensions result from an honest attempt to live a consistent Christian life and to contribute what one can to lifting the world towards God's purposes for it. As a teacher for many years of young preachers, I frequently said to them: "If you want to be nice and warm and comfortable in the ministry, do not get serious about being a real Christian and do not get serious about doing anything about the world in which you live. If you get serious about these things, you will be uncomfortably conscious of falling far short of doing and being what you ought to do and be. You will live under constant tension." This is just as true for the laymen as it is for the minister. Tension is natural and inevitable for the serious Christian.

A Backward Look

The fact that constructive tensions stem from the very nature of the Christian life can be seen by a glance at the preceding lessons of this book. Each subject discussed involves the serious searching Christian in tension of some type and to some degree.

For example, man is on a constant search for truth (Lesson 1). That search stems, to a large degree, from the fact that he was created in the image of God, that the image was marred by sin, and that man is constantly seeking its restoration. The image is restored through man's union with Christ, who is the exact image of the Father, but it is not completely or perfectly restored. The restoration is a process as well as an achievement. As a process there will continue an inner tug towards its fuller attainment until the end of the journey when we shall awake in His likeness.

Similarly, tension is the natural result of any serious consideration of the subjects discussed in the other lessons. The God we worship, who is a moral Person, expects His children to be like Him (Lesson 2). At best we fall far short. Even in our relations to our fellowman (Lesson 3) we do not measure up to God's expectations. We frequently treat our fellowman as a thing, an it, an instrument or a means rather than an end, a thou, created in the image of God and one for whom Christ died. There is still considerable class and racial prejudice in most of our lives.

When we examine the Scriptures, (Lesson 4) we realize that

Is the following statement true or false?

Constructive tensions result from an honest attempt to live a consistent Christian life and to contribute what one can to lifting the world towards God's purposes for it. _____

(true)

Is the following statement true or false?

The restoration of God's image is totally an achievement.

_____

(false)

We do not measure up to God's _____.

(expectations)

their expectations are far beyond our present level of living. This is true of the Old Testament but particularly of the New Testament, When we examine the quality of life lived by Jesus, we are deeply conscious of our need for divine help.

That help came to us in a unique way when we were brought into union with the resurrected Christ (Lesson 5). We discover, however, that even after that marvellous experience we fail to let Him fully live in us and express Himself through us. Life for us continues to be imperfect, plagued with inconsistencies and shortcomings. The only Christians who are not conscious of falling short are those who do not clearly understand what the Christian life means or are not thoroughly committed to living a real Christian life. God's best people are usually the very ones who are most dissatisfied with themselves and their present level of living.

Our union with Christ should mean that the fruit of the Christian life would naturally and inevitably evolve from our relation to Him. In other words, ideally the fruit is first inner and then outer. We discover, however, that while the indwelling Christ may be the source of the fruit we bear for Him that the fruit falls short in quantity and quality of His and even our expectation. We likewise discover that although the Christian life should be lived in the indicative mood, much of it must be actually lived in the imperative mood. There is a continuing conflict and tension between what we do and what we know we ought to do but particularly between what we are and what we are convinced we ought to be.

An examination of the lessons under "The Nature of the Christian Life" will reveal comparable sources of tension. For example, we should be motivated by a desire to glorify God (Lesson 6) in gratitude for what He has done for us. At best our motives are mixed. There are times when it seems that we seek our own glory more than the glory of God. There are similar conflicts regarding the source of authority in our lives (Lesson 7). There may be times when we sincerely seek to know and do the will of God. There are other times when we listen to the voice of our friends, our gang, our community, as well as our own wishes more than we listen for the voice of God.

The Kingdom of God is the supreme value of the Christian life (Lesson 8). It should be sought first by all of God's children. It is the treasure hidden in a field; it is the pearl of great price. Everything in the Christian's life should be subordinated to the Kingdom or rule of God, and if need be, given up for it. Will you not agree that frequently we seek first the temporal and material things of this world?

The ultimate ideal for the Christian is perfection (Lesson 9), a perfection measured by the perfection, completeness, wholeness, or maturity found in God. Who would dare say that he measures up to such a high ideal? The resulting tension for the serious Christian is deepened because he is persuaded that the ideal is beyond his ability to attain and even his capacity to comprehend or fully understand.

Certainly love for God and our fellowman is the crowning virtue of the Christian life (Lesson 10). But many of us love ourselves not only more than we love our neighbour but also more than we love God. The more fully we understand the

We do not live up to the _____ of the _____.

(expectations, Scripture)

Is the following statement true or false?

God's best people are usually the very ones who are most dissatisfied with themselves and their present level of living. _____

(true)

The lessons under "The Nature of the Christian Life" reveal sources of _____.

(tension)

Perfection is the ultimate _____ for the _____.

(ideal, Christian)

Many of us love ourselves even more than we love _____.

nature of *agape*, the distinctive New Testament word for love, the more deeply conscious we become that *agape* finds only incomplete or partial expression in our lives. Our love for God and our fellowman at best is a mixture of a gift-love *(agape)* and a need-love (*eros*).

What can we say when we consider the Cross as the unifying symbol of the Christian life (Lesson 11)? If the Cross could be restricted to Christ, we might feel little tension regarding it. But Jesus Himself pointedly said, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Again he said "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). The initial and continuing invitation of Jesus was and is, "Come, follow me." If we follow Him all the way, it will take us through the Garden to the Cross. Surely all of us will agree that our crucifixion of self, with selfish motives, purposes, and ambitions is only partial.

We can sum up by saying that every phase of the Christian life, when understood properly and considered seriously, is a creator of tension for the seeking, searching Christian. We should always remember, however, that such tension contributes to our growth in the Christian life: there is no progress without tension.

(God)

Tension contributes to Christian _____.

(growth)

Additional Reasons for Tension

There are additional reasons for tension, some of which may merely be different ways of stating some of the causes of tension previously mentioned. It has been suggested that tension is a natural, integral part of the Christian life. It would be correct to say that tension, to some degree, is the lot of all men: non-Christians as well as Christians. There are psychological and environmental tensions as well as the more strictly spiritual. There are occasions when the spiritual factors that contribute to tension are closely related to the psychological and environmental factors. There are, for example, tensions for Christians and non-Christians that stem from the fact that each of us is or at least we feel that we are a multiplicity of persons.

Some tensions for Christians and non-Christians stem from the fact that each of us is or at least we feel that we are a _____ *of* _____.

> Within my earthly temple there's a crowd.
> There's one of us that's humble; one that's proud.
> There's one that's broken-hearted for his sins,
> And one who, unrepentant, sits and grins.
> There's one who loves his neighbor as himself,
> And one who cares for naught but fame and self.
> From much corroding care would I be free
> If once I could determine which is me.

We are seaching for a unity that will give us a sense of oneness or wholeness and will release within us our maximum creative capacities.

(multiplicity, persons)

Eichrodt, the great German Old Testament scholar, says that "the whole life of the believer is lived under constant tension: the tension between the Now and the Hereafter, between the part and the perfect whole, between defeat and triumph."[1] The

[1] Walter Eichrodt, "The Question of Property in the Light of the Old Testament," *Biblical Authority for Today*, ed. by Alan Richardson and Wolfgang Schweitzer (SCM Press, 1951), p. 273.

Christian lives in two worlds. He is a citizen of the world but also a citizen of the Kingdom of God. He may be a stranger here within a foreign land but he is here. He faces in two directions. He looks to God for guidance and for strength, he looks out towards the world and those that live in the world with a desire to serve them in the name of his God. Changing the figure: one hand reaches up or out towards God, the other reaches down or out towards his fellowman. His desire is to bring the two closer together.

The clearer his vision of God and the other world, the sharper will be the contrast and conflict between the part and the perfect whole. The tug within him is towards the perfect, the complete, the whole but at his best he is deeply conscious of his incompleteness or imperfection. Even if one could attain personal perfection, he would feel very ill at ease in our imperfect society. He would also discover that he was quite limited in what he could do to move society towards wholeness or perfection.

One basic conflict that somewhat summarizes all of the preceding is the tension between the ideal and the real, between what we are and what we are persuaded we ought to be. There is a constant tug to come up higher. Without this tug or tension, our lives tend to level off and to become a more or less monotonous routine. The latter will continue unless and until some catastrophe comes into our lives or until something unusual awakens us. On the other hand, the higher the ideal for ourselves the sharper will be the inner conflict between the ideal self and the real self. Furthermore, the more the Christian moves towards his ideal self, the more marked is his conflict with the world in which he lives. He discovers that he not only has a civil war within his own soul; he is also at war with the world. In turn, the war with the world contributes to the inner civil war. He discovers that he has to come to some kind of terms with the world if he is to live in it. And yet he cannot completely accept the world as it is without denying his Christian faith. He knows that if he is to lift the world towards God's purposes for it, he must start with the world where it is but also he must maintain sufficient tension to lift or move the world in the direction in which it ought to go.

We may not like the world, but the preceding procedure or strategy requires some compromise or accommodation. Once we begin to compromise, how far shall we go? If we go too far in accommodating to the real world we not only will deny our Christian profession, we will also lose our capacity to lift the world. Experience has taught the Christian that many decisions, because of the kind of world in which he lives, are not clear-cut decisions between right and wrong.

Another way to express the same concept is to suggest, as stated previously, that many times the Christian seemingly has to choose between the lesser-of-two-evils. Such a decision cannot be equated with the intentional will of God. At best, it may be considered a part of His circumstancial will. Every lesser-of-two-evils decision results in some tension for the sensitive Christian. It is such tension, however, that moves the child of God more and more in the direction of the perfect or intentional will of God.

The Christian is a citizen of the world but also a citizen of the _____ of _____.

(Kingdom, God)

Man, at his best, is deeply conscious of his _____ or _____.

(incompleteness, imperfection)

Is the following statement true or false?

One basic conflict is the tension between the ideal and the real. _____

(true)

The higher the ideal for ourselves the sharper will be the inner conflict between the ideal self and the _____.

(real self)

Is the following statement true or false?

Every lesser-of-two-evils decision results in some tension for the sensitive Christian. _____

(true)

Let us spell out a little more specifically something that has already been implied. The serious Christian is caught, at times, in a frustrating dilemma. He may want, at least in his own personal life and in the principles he professes to follow, to be fully Christian. He is convinced, however, if he goes too far or too fast in applying those principles to the contemporary social situation that he may lose all opportunity to minister to or serve the world. In other words, the tension may become too great between him and his friends, his neighbours, his community, and even his church. He may become thoroughly frustrated. He wants to go all the way right now in applying the Christian ethic and the Christian spirit, yet he feels that he must compromise, to some degree, or be crucified. And what is more significant, he is not sure that his crucifixion would serve the Kingdom of God better than for him to relax the pressure a little, but to continue to maintain the tension in the right direction.

Tension is not only natural and inevitable for the individual Christian, it is also natural for the Christian community or the Church. There is some tension within the Church that more or less naturally evolves from the fact that it is a divine-human institution. It is divine in its origin, its mission and message. It is human in its constituency and its environment. It inevitably is influenced by both of its natures. If it ministers effectively to people and to the world in which they live, it must begin where they are. On the other hand, it will not lift them unless it maintains a wholesome tension between where they are and where they ought to be. The Church should serve both a priestly and a prophetic function. It should be "a refuge for disturbed souls" but also a disturber of souls. Its effort to keep these two functions or aspects of its life and work in balance is a source of tension for the Church itself. Also, the Church, as a human institution, is under the judgement of its own message as a divine institution. The Church needs to recognize that it is not what it ought to be. It needs to let its divine nature express itself more fully.

Tension also arises within the Church because its members differ in their insight into the Church's message and mission. Some prophetic, creative souls may take the Church's message seriously and seek to apply fully and consistently basic Christian teachings to their lives and to the life of the Church and the world. Others within the Christian fellowship consider such efforts of the "prophetic" as the work of impractical idealists.

The more the Church itself becomes a prophetic community the greater will be the tension between it and the world. In other words, "the more vigorously and consistently the church preaches, teaches, and practises the Christian ideal, the more tension it will create in the world and among men. A lack of tension between the church and the world would be an indication of an unhealthy condition."[2]

Release of Tension[3]

Notice that we do not say "Cure for Tension." There can be

The serious Christian is caught sometimes in a frustrating _____.

(dilemma)

Tension is also natural for the _____.

(Christian community)

The Church should also be a _____ *of souls.*

(disturber)

Tension arises within the Church because its members differ in their insight into the Church's _____ *and* _____.

(message, mission)

Is the following statement true or false?

A lack of tension between the Church and the world would be an indication of a healthy condition, _____

(false)

[2] T. B. Maston, *Christianity and World Issues* (Macmillan, 1957), p. 350.

[3] Most of this section and the next one on "Continuance of Tension" are adaptations of material in my book on *Christianity and World Issues*, pp. 351–54.

and are sources for the release or relaxing of the kind of tension we are discussing, but there is no complete cure. Does the Christian even have any solid hope for a release of the constructive type of tension? We are not referring here to the ordinary worries and tensions of the average Christian. As suggested previously, these destructive tensions can be eliminated or reduced by a stronger faith in the Lord. The tension we have been concerned with and are talking about here is that which is greatest or strongest for sincere and mature Christians, for those who are most responsive to the will of God and the most sensitive to the leadership of the divine Spirit. Are there any sources of release for such tension which at times seems almost unbearable for the prophetic Christian?

One step in the release of constructive tension is a recognition that such tension is a natural and necessary part of creative living. Abraham Heschel says that "all that is creative stems from a seed of endless discontent." Such creative tension is an indication of growth or progress. Here we refer not only to progress for the individual Christian but also for his church and the society in which he lives. So long as we are maturing, which should be to the end of life, we should continue to search for the Holy Grail, for a better and higher way of life. Furthermore, a discontent with our present level of living and with the world in which we live, including our church, will move us in the direction of a deeper and more meaningful contentment that we could not have without such a movement.

There are some Christians, unfortunately, who seemingly are largely free from creative constructive tension simply because they close their eyes and minds to their own failures and shortcomings and to the problems of the world. They tend to see everything, including themselves, through rose-coloured glasses. Or, if they are conscious of the moral and spiritual problems around them, they seek to convince themselves that the situation is more or less inevitable, that they cannot do anything about it. They adjust to or accept conditions as they are. They make their peace with the world. It is doubtful, however, if the Christian can indefinitely find peace within and with God through such a process or procedure.

Another step towards release is for the Christian to make an honest effort to apply fully the Christian spirit and ideal to his life and to the world. There can be no release from tension without some effort to improve or to remove the conditions that create the tension. The Christian will discover, however, that his efforts alone will not give him complete relief from tension. He may derive some satisfaction from the progress he makes towards the ideal, but it seems that the more progress he makes the deeper will be his consciousness that his best efforts fall far short of God's purpose for his life and for the world. In other words, the conscientious Christian cannot attain full release of or relief from the tensions of life through his own efforts.

Our Christian faith offers another means for the release of tension. That means is repentance. When we realize that we have failed, that we have fallen short of the purposes of God in our lives, we can cry unto Him for forgiveness. We can do this in

Destructive tensions can be eliminated or reduced by a stronger _____ in the _____.

(faith, Lord)

Creative tension is an indication of _____ or _____.

(growth, progress)

Is the following statement true or false?

Some Christians seemingly are largely free from creative constructive tension simply because they close their eyes and minds to their own failures and shortcomings and to the problems of the world. _____

(true)

There can be no release from tension without some effort to improve or _____ the conditions that _____ the tension.

(remove, create)

When we have fallen short of the purposes of God in our lives, we can cry unto _____ for _____.

confidence, knowing that we have "an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1).

An abiding faith in God is still another means for the release of tension. We are not talking about a blind fatalism that will cause one to sit down and do nothing. Rather, we are talking about the kind of faith that will impel and inspire one to do the will of God as best he can and trust the Lord to take care of the results and also to take care of him. He believes that if he is on the side of the sovereign God of the universe, he is on the side of ultimate victory.

There is involved in the preceding one of the many paradoxes of our Christian faith. The serious Christian is never completely free from tension, but as a backdrop for the tension, he can have at the same time the peace that passeth understanding. Such a peace stems from the Christian's faith in a God who is sovereign, a faith that saves him from defeating fears and enables him to live creatively although insecurely in the world. Paul Tillich suggests that "yes" and "no" is a law of all truth. We can have the courage to accept the infinite tension between yes and no because "there is a yes above the yes and no of life and truth." This is a yes which is not ours. It is the Resurrection of Christ that reveals "the final yes without another no."[4]

(Him, forgiveness)

An abiding faith in God is one means for the _____ *of* _____.

(release, tensions)

The serious Christian is never completely free from _____.

(tension)

Continuance of Tension

As previously suggested, the serious Christian will never be completely free from tension. It could not be otherwise since the Christian at his best is always on the way, he is always becoming, he never fully attains. How could it be otherwise when his life is to be measured by the stature found in Christ?

The Christian at his best is always _____.

(becoming)

Also, when the Christian repents of falling short of God's glory, of His will and purpose, and God forgives and restores him to fellowship, that renewed fellowship in turn gives him a clearer and deeper insight into God's will for his life and his purposes for the world. He receives a new vision from God. He then goes from the presence of the Lord and attempts to make that vision a reality in his life and in the world. He falls short. Again he repents. God forgives. He received a deepened insight into God's will for him and his world. This process is repeated over and over again.

The preceding may seem to represent a continuous meaningless paradoxical round. This is not the viewpoint, however, of the understanding Christian. It may be a round, but each round can and should represent some progress towards the Christian ideal, towards the intentional or ultimate will of God. The constant round is inevitable, since the final standard for the Christian is full maturity, completeness, wholeness, or perfection, and a wholeness or perfection found in God.

Tension is not only a continuing experience for the individual Christian but also for the Christian community. It is true that some churches have so completely made their peace with the world that there seems to be no tension between the church and the world. Such a church has lost its power to lift the world towards God's purposes for it. The message of such a church,

Is the following statement true or false?

The tension that should be felt between the church and the world will be strengthened and made more effective if it is created not only by what the church preaches but also by what it practises. _____

[4] Paul Tillich, *The New Being*, pp. 102–3.

however, is always superior to its practice. That message creates tension, to some degree, even within the worldly, secular church and between it and the world. The tension that should be felt between the church and the world will be strengthened and made more effective if it is created not only by what the church preaches but also by what it practises.

The tension between the church and the world should not become so great that the church would lose all opportunity to minister to the world and the people of the world. If we think of that tension as a rubber band, we may see more clearly what is meant. The degree to which the world is lifted towards the Christian ideal will be determined by the tautness of the "rubber band." On the other hand, if the tension becomes too great the "band" may break and the church would no longer be able to minister effectively to the world. The individual or the group, church or otherwise, that serves most effectively the world and the people of the world must progressively seek to move it and them towards the Christian ideal. This means that the Christian ideal for the individual and for the world is never static; it is always dynamic, always in movement. As we move towards it, it moves ahead of us.

Most of us and most of our churches do not need the preceding warning. The greater danger is that we and they will go entirely too far in adjusting the Christian ideal to the so-called "realities of life." Too frequently we tend to identify the ideal with what we consider the immediately attainable, to equate the circumstantial will of God with His intentional will. When the church does this, it will mean the loss of tension between the message it proclaims and the world. Such a church will tend to become conformed to the world rather than to be a transformer of the world.

(true) _____

Too frequently we tend to equate the _____ *will of God with His* _____ *will.*

(Compare your answer with the text.)

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (Levels 1, 2, and 3). After reading the study guide text, answer the following questions.

1. What causes constructive tensions in the Christian life? _____

2. How does the process of restoration help the serious Christian? _____

3. What happens when we study the quality of life lived by Jesus? _____

4. What is a usual quality of God's "best people"? _____

5. What does Jesus' parable about the treasure hidden in a field suggest for our Christian lives?

6. What does the serious Christian need to remember about tension?

7. Give one basic conflict that summarizes the Christian's efforts to find unity, perfection, or completeness.

8. What happens when we set higher ideals for ourselves?

9. Explain the author's statement that tension is also inevitable for the Church.

10. What would a lack of tension between the Church and the world suggest?

Explain

11. What does creative tension indicate?

12. Why are some Christians seemingly free from creative tension?

13. What is necessary if the Christian is to experience release from tension?

14. Since our Christian faith offers a means for relief of tension, what must we do when we realize that we have failed?

15. How does an abiding faith provide a release of tension for the Christian?

16. Why does the author say that the serious Christian will never be completely free from tension?

17. In what way is the tension between the Church and the world strengthened and made more effective? _____

_____

_____

18. What frequently happens when the Church goes too far in adjusting the Christian ideal to the "realities" of life? _

_____

_____

_____

Supplementary activity (Levels 2 and 3). The following activities are based on the study guide text.

1. Summarize briefly the author's discussion of the section entitled "A Backward Look."
2. Define constructive tension.
3. Explain how tension contributes to Christian growth.
4. Describe the tension created by the Christian being a citizen of two worlds.
5. List four ways that a Christian's tension can be released.
6. Explain continuance of tension.
7. What is the result when a church identifies the ideal with what we consider the immediately attainable, equates the circumstantial will of God with the intentional will of God?

Advanced activity (Level 3). The following activities are based on the study guide text.

1. Do you agree with the author when he admits that some compromise is necessary in the Christian life? Why? Why not? If you agree, how far should a Christian compromise? In what areas should he compromise?
2. Write a paper of at least two pages entitled "The Cross." Develop these points:
   The unifying quality of the Cross
   The tensions of the Cross
   The victory of the Cross
3. Write a sermon or Bible lesson entitled "The Crowd Within Me." You may use the author's poem. Support your sermon or lesson with Scripture references.
4. Keep a diary for the week of the areas where your Christian walk creates tension for you. Tell how you handled your tension and how it helped your Christian growth.

Seminar Discussion

(Note to Leader: If you have Level 3 students in your Seminar group, please ask them to share their Level 3 projects with your group.)

1. Discuss the destructive tensions. Contrast them with constructive tension.
2. Discuss this statement by the author: "God's best people are usually the very ones who are most dissatisfied with themselves and their present level of living."

3. Discuss the author's statement that the Christian faces two directions.
4. Discuss this question: How much can a Christian compromise without sinning against God?
5. What tensions within the church you attend *could* cause problems?
6. Discuss current tensions between the Church and the world in your area.
7. Discuss this statement: Christians can and should be thankful for *some* tensions.

STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

1

BIBLICAL ETHICS AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

This study guide surveys the ethical teachings of the Old and New Testament and applies them to contemporary issues such as political involvement of Christians, race relations, economic systems, social status of women, population explosion, mixed marriages and divorce, and ecology. (72610)

2

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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P. O. Box 4255

El Paso, Texas, 79914, USA

BSPH Art. No. 72605